8-2008

Understanding and Implementing Classroom Discussions of Literature: A Case Study of One High School Teacher's Beliefs and Practices Concerning Classroom Discussions

Tanya Neva Baker

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/etd

Part of the Secondary Education and Teaching Commons

Recommended Citation

http://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/etd/489

This Open-Access Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine.
UNDERSTANDING AND IMPLEMENTING CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS OF LITERATURE: A CASE STUDY OF ONE HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER'S BELIEFS AND PRACTICES CONCERNING CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS

By

Tanya Neva Baker
B.A. University of Maine, 1990
M.A. University of Maine, 1999

A THESIS
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education (in Literacy Education)

The Graduate School
The University of Maine
August, 2008

Advisory Committee:

Janice V. Kristo, Professor of Education, Co-advisor
Richard Kent, Assistant Professor of Education, Co-advisor
Elizabeth Allan, Associate Professor of Education
Michael W. Smith, Professor of Education, Temple University
Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, Professor of Education, Boise State University
Classroom discussion of literature is often lauded as a powerful pedagogical tool in the high school English classroom. Researchers have shown that student talk in the classroom is a powerful teaching strategy. Many teachers express a belief in classroom discussions as a means of teaching literature. At the same time, relatively few teachers actually use classroom discussions of literature in their teaching.

Research has identified that student talk in the classroom is a powerful pedagogical tool, and also that such discussions are difficult for many classroom teachers to enact. Little research has explored why teachers might have this disconnect. Teachers believe that classroom discussions are good for students and for their practice, yet they don't use this strategy in the classroom.

This study looks at one teacher who believes that classroom discussions of literature should be a powerful teaching tool, but who has struggled to effectively
actualize this practice in his classroom. A combination of qualitative and quantitative analyses of the teacher's statements beliefs and his practices, as seen in classroom transcripts and student work, was conducted to determine what the teacher believes to be the attributes of a good classroom discussion, and what he did, inside and outside the classroom, to foster discussions with such attributes.

Results identified successful practices that the teacher named and was aware of as well as successful practices that seemed to be invisible to the teacher himself. The findings suggest that the way teachers talk about classroom discussions may fail to give voice to all the aspects of classroom talk that they actually value. In addition, it is suggested that additional research is needed that involves teachers looking at classroom practice with a researcher's lens.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people have contributed to this work in a variety of ways. While I cannot adequately acknowledge all who have supported me throughout my educational journey, I wish to especially acknowledge those mentioned below.

This work is dedicated to my husband, James Heans. An inspirational teacher, partner, friend and colleague, he has supported me in every way possible – by opening his classroom and his teaching practices to my prying eyes and ears, by covering the homefront while I was off learning or writing, by supporting me as a writer – drying my tears or pushing me forward – and by being continually interested in reading, writing and learning.

I am equally indebted to my parents, Marcia Lincoln and Guy Baker, who have always encouraged my curiosity. They taught me to love books and learning, to ask questions, and to be brave. I must also thank my daughter, Anna, who at eight years old has never known her mother not to be in school. She reminds me to keep working on that paper – and that revising is okay.

I am grateful to each of the members of my dissertation committee. Michael W. Smith is simply brilliant. I owe him a debt of gratitude I will not be able to repay. Michael deserves recognition not only in his own clear and prolific work, which inspired this project, but also for his teaching and mentoring. His ability to follow the line of thought, no matter how convoluted it may seem in the beginning, tied with his clear and calm support to the writer is a powerful example of what good teaching looks like. I appreciate his suggestions that helped me think a little bit harder, and his unflagging belief that I could.
Jeff Wilhelm has been a most generous “more-experienced other,” a guide into the world of academia and publishing. Always willing to share enthusiastically his ideas, his work, and his knowledge, Jeff has opened many doors and introduced me to many of the most salient career and learning opportunities. I will be forever in his debt – certainly without him I wouldn’t have come this far.

Jan Kristo has been uncompromisingly always at the helm of this committee. I appreciate her willingness to take up my work when my advisor left, her honest assessment of the work as it progressed, and her willingness to help if asked.

Rich Kent is a gentleman and a scholar, as well as an eternal optimist. Recognized as Maine Teacher of Year for his unwavering support of high school students, he brings this same optimism to his work with graduate students. I appreciate the kind words, helpful hints, and, belief that anyone can do this, you can too!

Elizabeth Allen was one of the best teachers I had as a graduate student. Her class in qualitative methods was intellectually stimulating and challenging and also profoundly helpful at the nuts-and-bolts level. Elizabeth has proven to be much the same, undeterred (even as I was) by my missteps and failures.

To all who are not named here – family, friends and colleagues who have provided love, support and encouragement – thank you so much.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ................................................................................................. ii

LIST OF TABLES ........................................................................................................ x

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .............................................................................. 1

That Was Then ............................................................................................................. 1

This Is Now .................................................................................................................. 2

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ..................................................... 4

What Research Says About Classroom Discussions ............................................... 5


What is Learned? ........................................................................................................ 10

Social Context of Classroom Practice ..................................................................... 14

What Do Researchers Say About Talk, and Who is Listening? ............................. 18

What Teachers Might Think: A Review of Popular Texts For Secondary English Teachers ........................................................................................................... 19

Who Talks and What Do They Say .......................................................................... 20

What is Learned ......................................................................................................... 20

Social Context of Classroom Practice ..................................................................... 22

What do Teachers Hear About the Research Concerning Classroom Discourse? 22

What Teachers Might Do ......................................................................................... 23

Give Students Time to Think .................................................................................. 23

Teach the Skills of Discussion .................................................................................. 24

Ask Authentic Questions .......................................................................................... 27

Practice Uptake ......................................................................................................... 28
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS..............................................................................53

Attributes of Good Classroom Discussion of Literature: Who Talks and What Do They Say..............................................................55

Characteristics of Talking Behavior.......................................................56

The Teacher Says..................................................................................56

Fluency.................................................................................................56

Participation.........................................................................................58

Engagement..........................................................................................58

Debate...................................................................................................59

The Transcripts Say...............................................................................60

Speaker Turns......................................................................................60

Communication Units Per Turn.............................................................61

Kinds of Communication Units.............................................................66

Characteristics of the Content of the Discussion....................................72

The Teacher Says..................................................................................72

Insight...................................................................................................73

Connections........................................................................................73

Staying on Topic...................................................................................74

The Transcripts Say...............................................................................74

Content of Informative Statements.......................................................75

Kinds of Reasoning of Informative Statements.....................................82

Knowledge Sources of Questions.........................................................85

Kind of Reasoning in Questions............................................................86
What Did the Teacher Do to Plan for and Implement Successful Discussions of Literature?.................................89

Fluency............................................................................90

   The Teacher Says.........................................................90

   The Transcripts Say.....................................................90

Participation.....................................................................91

   Teaching the Skills of Discussion....................................91

      The Teacher Says.......................................................91

      The Transcripts say......................................................92

Uptake.........................................................................93

   The Teacher Says........................................................93

   The Transcripts Say......................................................95

Engagement .....................................................................96

   Time to Think...............................................................96

      The Teacher Says.......................................................97

      The Transcripts Say......................................................97

Debate.........................................................................102

   Framing the Unit as Inquiry............................................102

      The Transcripts Say......................................................102


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1</td>
<td>Rank, Title, Date, and Description of Jamie's Four Best Discussions ..........54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2</td>
<td>Characteristics of a Good Discussion as Defined by the Teacher ..............55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3</td>
<td>Number of Turns by Speaker ........................................................................60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4</td>
<td>Mean Number of Communication Units with Turns by Speaker ........................62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5</td>
<td>Percentage of Communication Units Within Turns ......................................67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6</td>
<td>Knowledge Sources for Informative Statements: Percentage of Units by Speaker ........................................................................76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7</td>
<td>Kinds of Reasoning for Informative Statements: Percentage of Units by Speaker ........................................................................84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 8</td>
<td>Knowledge Source for Questions: Percentage of Units by Speaker ...............85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 9</td>
<td>Kinds of Reasoning for Questions: Percentage of Units by Speaker ...............87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 10</td>
<td>Kinds of Responses: Percentage of Units by Speaker ..................................95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 11</td>
<td>Prediscussion Assignments ..........................................................................98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table B.1</td>
<td>Excerpt of Coded Transcript from November 4 ...........................................134</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

That Was Then

In my last year in the classroom, I taught a section of twelfth grade AP students. In our first classroom discussion, students virtually ignored one another while they took turns spouting comments which were generally not in any way linked to one another. I was confused by the way they behaved in that situation, and went next door to talk to their eleventh grade teacher.

“I just had my first literature discussion with the AP students,” I said.

“Oh,” she replied, “They are great at discussion, aren’t they? They love to talk.”

“Yes, they love to talk,” I agreed. “They just aren’t very good at listening.”

I worked with those students for months. I tried to teach them to follow a thread of discussion to its logical conclusion. We worked on waiting to bring up new topics until people had had their say about the topic on the floor. They learned to respond to one another instead of just to me. In the middle of the year, a new teacher told me she was having some trouble with classroom discussions. She asked if she could observe a literature discussion in my classroom. Of course she could. She should come to this senior AP class. She came, she observed. I was eager to discuss what she had seen.

“Oh,” she said, “I saw just what I see in my own class. Half the class involved and engaged, the other half never says anything. This didn’t help much, except I guess it’s just the same everywhere. At least I know it’s not just me or what I’m doing. Thanks anyway.” I was devastated.
This Is Now

But that was years ago, and I’ve spent the intervening years at the University with my head deeply buried in theories and ideas about what makes classrooms work. When I look back at the incident, it is less devastation that I feel, and more curiosity. Did the discussion that I had been so proud of really not happen the way that I saw it? Or was there something else going on?

Had we three teachers gone beyond the five minutes of conversation many teachers have time for, we may have figured out that we were applying very different standards in defining good classroom conversation, and that our different ideas about what counted affected both what we saw and what we did as classroom teachers in promoting classroom discussions. We might have moved beyond talking about any particular group of students or any particular discussion, to talking about our underlying ideas about classroom discussion as a pedagogical tool.

If my high school teaching colleagues and I had very different ideas about what counts as classroom discussion, or if we struggled to articulate those ideas, at least we weren’t alone. According to Nystrand (2006)

Today, English language arts teachers and students are generally aware of the instructional potential of discussion, though discussion practices vary widely among classrooms, from teacher elaborations during question-and-answer recitation . . . to debates, to open-ended sharing of ideas, including multiple turns uninterrupted by teacher test questions (p. 395).

If we also struggled to use those standards to move students toward successful participation in classroom literature discussions, we weren’t alone in that either. It seems
not only that English teachers vary widely in their beliefs about what counts as classroom discussion, but that they also struggle to put those ideas into practice. One national survey found that 95% of English teachers value peer discussion in literature instruction, yet only 33% of them regularly use it in their teaching practice (Comeryas & DeGroff, 1998).

While research lauds the value of discussion as a pedagogical tool, teachers seem to struggle to put it to use in their classrooms. What might make a practice so difficult to define? What makes a practice at the same time highly valuable and yet unused or unusable? I decided to pursue this question through a case study of a high school teacher who, like many teachers in that Comeryas and DeGroff survey, understands the potential value of classroom discussions, but has struggled with the use of this pedagogical strategy in his classroom. In looking at classroom discussions in this teacher’s room, I asked two questions:

- How does this classroom teacher define the attributes of a good classroom discussion?

- What did this teacher do, inside and outside the discussion, to foster discussions that have such attributes?
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

I read once that teachers are second only to air traffic controllers in the number of decisions they have to make in a given day. Class discussions of literature, especially if they are dialogic, rather than monologic, only increase the number of factors to which a teacher must attend and the number of decisions a teacher must make on the fly: For instance, who should speak next? How should I respond to that comment? Who has participated? Who has not? Are we going down a bad path (toward misunderstanding, argument, disrespect)? A review of the literature around the use of classroom discussions in middle and high school English language arts reveals a practice much lauded but sometimes unclearly articulated or underexplained, a practice whose “desirable educational effects, particularly in English language arts are often oblique rather than direct” (Nystrand, 2006, p. 393). One might, then, summarize what we know about classroom discussions this way: Successful classroom discussions of literature are difficult to undertake, require teachers to pay attention to more factors than other pedagogical choices, and produce outcomes that are often unclear. Rather than ask why teachers have so many different ideas about whole-group discussions, we might rather ask why they even dare to take up the practice in the first place.

The following review of literature seeks to understand the origins of a number of ideas that my colleagues and I held about classroom discussions, to unearth other ideas about what makes successful classroom talk, and to understand the usefulness of these ideas in a teacher’s daily life.
What Research Says About Classroom Discussions

Much research into classroom discussions of literature has set out to record and observe what happens in classroom discussions. This research clearly illustrates that the normal pattern of talk in classrooms follows a particular (monologic) pattern. This pattern, recitation, is described in this way: "the teacher asks a series of pre-planned questions, initiates all topics, and rarely interacts with the substance of the students' answers except to evaluate them" (Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1996, p. 3). This pattern has also been called the IRE pattern in which the teacher initiates talk with a question to which a student responds and the teacher evaluates that response (Mehan, 1979). Nystrand and his colleagues (1996) argue that the contract that underlies this "unique, three-part exchange, which exists only in instructional situations," has the following provisions: Knowledge exists and comes from authorities (teachers, textbooks), the teacher initiates topics of discussions and determines what is worth knowing (remembering), knowledge is transmitted from the authority to the student, and the "epistemic role of students . . . is limited to remembering what others . . . have said . . . not figuring things out . . . and not generating any new knowledge" (p. 16).

However, recent research in the nature of and relationship between talk and learning (Vygotsky, 1986; Bakhtin, 1981; Wertsch, 1991) has suggested that the idea that information can be "transmitted" is "problematic, if not naïve" (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995). As Marshall, Smagorinsky, and Smith summarize the social constructivist argument, "people learn how to think by listening to – and participating in – the ways in which people around them talk" (p. 7). This belief that people learn in
socially mediated ways has brought classroom discourse researchers to distinguish between IRE or recitation, the type of talk generally found in American schools, and "high quality classroom discourse" (Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1996). They define high quality discussion in this way:

By discussion we mean turn-taking among students and teachers which departs from the normal IRE structure of classroom discourse and does not obligate students to wait for teacher's evaluation before responding themselves to another student's response, and where their teacher, rather than evaluating a student's response, joins in and becomes a conversant (p. 16).

Describing high quality discussion as more like conversation, they note that high quality discussion involves "more probing and substantive interactions . . . the talk is more like conversation than recitation" (p. 18). Students' responses and not just the teacher's questions shape the course of the talk. In other words, all participants in the conversation, the students and the teacher, listen and respond to each other and the course of the talk depends not only on the teacher's preparation, but on what both the teachers and the students bring to the encounter.

In monologially organized instruction, the textbook and the teacher's voice are the main voices, whereas in dialogically organized instruction, teachers make some public space for unofficial student voices, consequently the discourse is more balanced so that the teacher's voice is but one voice among many (Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1996, p. 11)
Various researchers have sought to clarify, within this dialogic pattern of discourse, what constructs are most important in understanding successful classroom discussions. One area of research literature that addresses classroom discussion is focused on describing what happens in typical classrooms. Another body of research looks at what and how students learn through the pedagogy of classroom discussion. A third research area focuses on placing the pedagogy of discussion into the larger social context of peer groups, classrooms, schools and communities. Each of these areas of classroom discussion research is discussed next. This research is reviewed to provide the context of what researchers know about classroom discussions and to examine what parts of this research seem to be available and useful to classroom teachers.

**Who Talks? For How Long? About What?**

Nystrand and his colleagues operationalized the term “discussion” in this way: “the free exchange of information among students and/or between at least three students and the teacher that lasted at least a half minute” (Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1996, p. 36). This length of episode and number of speakers sounds very limited, and yet, having operationalized the term in this way, Nystrand and his colleagues, in a large-scale study of eighth and ninth grade classrooms in which they analyzed hundreds of hours of transcripts, determined that very little of such discussion took place, about 50 seconds of class per day in eighth grade, and less than 15 seconds in ninth (p. 42).

When discussion did take place, Nystrand argued, there was evidence of increased thematic coherence. Because high quality discussion resembles conversation with all the participants listening and responding to one another, this listening and responding “chain
together question and response” and topics are sustained across conversational turns. This stands in contrast to IRE, in which teachers “often change topics abruptly as soon as they are satisfied with students’ mastery of a particular point” (Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1996, p. 11). This moving on to the next question as soon as a student demonstrates what she knows is one of the ways monologic instruction short-circuits the development of ideas (p. 19). In fact, these researchers found that one attribute of high quality discussion is that it involves relatively fewer questions than monologic instruction (p. 16). Most of these questions serve to clarify ideas and information, and they are asked because the asker (teacher or student) authentically needs to know, not for the purpose of quizzing one another.

Nystrand and his colleagues also found that there were particular moves that teachers made within the discussion that created space for student voices and student knowledge-building. According to these researchers, teachers work to move their classrooms toward a dialogic ideal when they ask authentic questions and practice uptake of students’ answers.

In recitation a teacher’s questions are pre-planned, the course of the lesson scripted. The teacher must put her energy into preparation and then follow the script that she has prepared. On the other hand, in dialogic discussion teachers ask what Nystrand and his colleagues call “authentic questions” which are questions to which they really don’t know the answer, or don’t have a pre-specified answer in mind (Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1996). In large part, these questions arise authentically in the course of the discussion, rather than being planned out in advance.
Uptake entails any conversational move that a teacher makes to recognize a student’s contribution and keep it in play in the conversation. For example, uptake could include a clear pause (hmmmm...), repeating a question, or asking others to comment (Tanya says X, what do you think, Jeff?).

Nystrand’s studies into classroom discourse shed much light on what typically happens in American classrooms. From his descriptions he draws several useful conclusions and offers practical suggestions to teachers about how to move toward a more dialogic classroom. For instance, his suggestions to use authentic questions and uptake are two concrete ideas that classroom teachers can take into their classrooms. However, it should be noted that his definition and examples of the term “authentic question” are somewhat problematic. While he defines “authentic question” as a question to which the teacher does not know the answer, or is not looking for a particular answer, the example he offers is an excerpt of classroom discourse in which the teacher asks questions to which she clearly knows the answer. These are three of the teacher’s questions, included in Opening Dialogue as examples of authentic questions, drawn from an excerpt of a classroom discussion of the young adult novel Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry: 1. What is his [character’s] name? 2. Was it Turner? (this question is the repetition, or uptake, of a student’s question) and 3. Why? Why would he want to keep shopping at that terrible store? Nystrand describes the first question as the teacher’s “feigning a lapse” in order to allow students to control the content of the discussion. Seemingly, then, the authenticity of questions is, in part, determined not so much by whether the teacher really knows the answer to the question, but rather by the way in which answers to these questions are received (Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, &
Prendergast, 1996). In other words, questions are “authentic” to the degree that they allow teachers to open the floor for what students have to say, creating a contrast to recitation in which the teacher “initiates and dominates” and students are “passive,” expected to recall what they have learned and what other people think.” The role of the teacher in high quality discussion, then, Nystrand might say, is to genuinely listen to what students say, to treat them and their ideas with seriousness. While Nystrand’s point is taken here, that teachers often listen only for the answer they want to hear, but in dialogic discussions the teacher listens to and works with all of the answers that students bring to the floor, the term “authentic question” as it is used is somewhat problematic.

Nystrand and his colleagues have done much research in classroom discourse that seeks first to describe what is currently happening in American classrooms, and then to suggest what teachers could do, and what they might look for, as they strive to move from recitation to conversation in their classrooms. Other researchers have pushed beyond Nystrand’s call for more dialogic talk in classrooms, to try to operationalize and study the learning that takes place when dialogic classroom discussions take place.

**What is Learned?**

The truth is we have all wiled away hours of pleasant conversation with friends, family, colleagues and even strangers on airplanes from which we have learned nothing. While one could certainly make the argument that we must first change the culture of schools, the ways of doing business, and focus on the outcomes of those changes later (in other words, we could strive toward dialogically organized classrooms now and worry later about whether students are learning anything from sharing the floor), many researchers argue that dialogic conversation, in and of itself, is not a powerful enough
educational construct with which to judge the success or failure of the use classroom conversations as a pedagogical tool. Marshall, Smagorinsky, and Smith (1995) conducted a series of related studies in which they applied a measurement tool developed by Marshall (1989) to look not only at the number, type, and length of student and teacher turns, but also to look at the sort of intellectual work that undergird those turns. These researchers first coded classroom conversations for the length of episodes, an episode being a sequence of speaker turns on a single, identifiable topic. This construct is related to Nystrand’s length of time that students talk without teacher interruption and his finding that classroom discussions led to longer episodes (numbers of turns on a single topic). Marshall, Smagorinsky and Smith then further coded each speaker’s turn. This coding system distinguishes two levels of organization: speaker turns, which include everything a speaker says until she stops talking, and communication units, which are statements within speaker turns that were coded for analysis. Marshall’s coding system allows researchers to analyze each communication unit for its linguistic function, for knowledge base, and for kind of reasoning. In other words, it allows us not only to see who is talking, but about what they are speaking and in what ways. In their studies of discussions of literature in high school classrooms, Marshall, Smagorinsky and Smith found four general patterns in the classroom talk. 1. Teachers dominated most of the large-group discussions. Generally, the floor was returned to the teacher after each turn. 2. Teachers used their turns for a number of purposes (to direct activities, to share information, to ask questions and to respond to students’ contributions) while students generally only used their turns to answer teachers’ questions. 3. Students informative statements were generally shaped by the kinds of questions that teachers asked. 4.
Teachers used their responses to students’ contributions to “weave the discussion as a whole into a coherent and sustained examination of two or three general topics” (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, p. 55). Ultimately, Marshall, Smagorinsky and Smith show that even in sustained, whole-group conversations teachers generally directed the flow and the topics of conversation. “The students’ role was usually to help develop an interpretation, rarely to construct or defend an interpretation of their own” (p. 56).

While these findings concur with the findings of Nystrand et. al. (1996), they extend the notion of who talks, for how long, and how, in order to consider what that means for the students’ role in knowledge construction.

Beyond who is talking or controlling the talk, another measure of whether a conversation is going anywhere, educationally speaking, is evidence of the ability of a student to use what knowledge he or she brings to the conversation to work on the problem at hand. In Marshall’s coding scheme, this is a communication unit coded as drawn from a “personal-autobiographical” or “general” knowledge source. While teachers necessarily have much more to bring to the conversation in terms of knowledge of literature and literary scholarship, students have knowledge gained from their life experiences. Another attribute of high quality classroom discussions of literature, according to these researchers, is that they allow students to use the knowledge that they do have as a scaffold on which to build their literary knowledge. While many teachers see students’ talk about popular culture or their own lives as disruption (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001), some researchers have found that when students were taught to use their personal experiences critically, they considered sources of information in the story and

Another way that we can look for evidence of a conversation “going somewhere” is through evidence of collaboration or disagreement. Smith (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995) studied adult book clubs to try to understand what made such discussions of literature engaging and enjoyable and to extrapolate from that what attributes we might try to make a part of classroom discussions. One finding of that work is the presence of collaboration. Smith found that book club participants work together and build on what other participants say far more often than students in the English classroom. This is an attribute of discussion which Rex and McEachen (1999) document as important in the building of a dialogic classroom. In this study of the first 21 days of a high school English classroom, Rex documents an incident in which several students take the floor to collaboratively co-construct the answer to another student’s question. According to Rex, this collaborative turn-taking “opened particular opportunities for students to be participants as questioners and sources of information” (p. 86).

Interestingly, while Connolly and Smith (2002) worked explicitly to help students build collaboration into their discussions, students rarely used collaborative turn-taking and actually placed more valued on disagreements in their classroom discussions. Connolly and Smith attribute this value of disagreement, which Christoph and Nystrand (2001) also note, to the “lively and playful” exchanges around disagreement, the lack of the need to be right, and the ability of disagreement to help students understand another point of view and to generate new ideas (p. 21). Christoph and Nystrand (2001) make the point that when students argue with one another they not only disagree with one another,
but also create a conversational space in which they are not deferring to the teacher’s authority (p. 23). Both collaborative turn-taking and disagreements with one another, then, seem to open the conversational space so that students see their work as more than simply supporting a teacher’s interpretation of literature; students can begin to see themselves as constructing, and arguing for, their own interpretations. Furthermore, both collaboration and disagreement signal a student’s attention to other people’s ways of thinking, the ability to acknowledge, and perhaps learn from, what other people say.

Nystrand’s studies of classroom discourse focus on what students know and how students represent their knowledge and learn from one another in classroom discussions. These studies are, for the most part, focused on what students and teachers do within a discussion. While Nystrand argues that dialogically organized discussions change the “epistemic role” of students in the classroom, from knowledge-consumers (and repeaters) to knowledge-constructors, such studies fail to consider the larger surround of the classroom and the other ways of learning in which students are engaged in that classroom. Applebee (1993) has argued that teachers often add new methods of teaching without considering how those methods fit with other methods they employ, ending up with a sort of pedagogical schizophrenia. To further understand how and why classroom discussions of literature work as pedagogical tools, researchers must consider how their use fits into the context of the classroom in which it is being used, as well as how it fits into students’ understandings of school and their ways of talking at home and with peers.

**Social Context of Classroom Practice**

In contrast to these studies which locate information about classroom discourse in the conversation itself, some researchers interest themselves not only in the episodes of
classroom discourse, but in the way that such discourse is situated within the culture of the classroom or even the larger surround of their home communities.

Rex and McEachen (Rex & McEachen, 1999), for instance, are interested in the role that classroom discourse plays in providing (or withholding) students' access to academic discourse. She argues that learning is, in part, identity formation, and classroom discussions should allow students to gain access to the “academic English knowledge building process by entering the academic discourse of the group within which they will use it” (p. 70). Discussion should allow students access to the academic code, an understanding of its purpose and applications, and the self-identity of a member of that discourse community. As Rex notes, “the rules for what counts as discussion discourse knowledge are situated within the culture of the classroom” (p. 70). In viewing classroom discussion as situated within the classroom, one must view the teacher as the “socializing agent,” the person who does or does not make clear to students what counts for knowledge in this subject, and even more specifically, in this classroom.

Seeing this idea of the teacher as socializing agent rooted in the work of Bruner (1983), Rex uses Bruner’s terms “handover” and “take-up” which he uses to explain the process by which children learn to “take control of the process of learning to talk under the scaffolded instruction of adult caregivers” (Rex & McEachen, 1999, p. 72). She argues that teachers must negotiate a process over time to help students build academic language from the scaffold of their social language. In her case study of a high school English teacher, she is able to name many moves made by the teacher in order to “hand over” control of the instructional space of classroom conversations. While some of these moves take place within classroom discussions of literature, others take place during
recitation or other moments in the classroom. Some of these moves include: being able to take multiple roles such as gatekeeper of the instructional space, more knowledgeable other, or engaged learner; subordinating his/her reading to a student’s reading; encouraging students to bring forward their own knowledge to answer questions; affirming the role of student’s questions; and naming the criteria of good response. Rex’s study offers a number of examples of how the teacher makes these moves, first in teacher-controlled question-and-answer exchanges, and then in more open classroom discussions.

Other researchers interested in the larger context in which classroom practice is located have found that paying attention to the larger surround of the classroom, the school, and the community can help us understand not only how teachers work to hand over the process of learning to students, but how and why students might not always take up that which is handed over.

Because the roles for teacher and student in high quality discussion vary significantly from the roles that teachers and students play in recitation, and because recitation is overwhelmingly more common in schools, both teachers and students will struggle to understand and meet their roles in this new way of “doing school.” This too is complicated by students’ experiences of talk and authority in school. Students must be prepared to accept a teacher’s “dialogic bid” (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001). Rex reminds us:

Students’ actions in learning academic English literacy occur at the level of identity, selfhood and personality. What counts as knowledge, whose voices may be heard, and what version of self may be brought forward determines what
students say, write and read, how they do so, and how they feel about themselves when they do (Rex & McEachen, 1999, p. 71).

Researchers seem generally to agree, there are many risks to students in this new way of doing business. Students risk their relationship with their teacher. As one of Connolly’s students wrote, “a teacher’s opinion weighs heavier than a fellow student’s” (Connolly & Smith, 2002, p. 19). But perhaps much more dangerous to students is to risk looking the fool in front of their classmates. Connolly and Smith, in asking students to reflect on their work in small and large discussion groups, give us a sense of students’ perception of this risk as extraordinarily high. While Christoph and Nystrand (2001) argue “students are at least as accustomed to traditional teaching methods as teachers are, but, like their teacher, students can grow, extending from their roots in traditional classroom practice when they are given the opportunity” (p. 28). Smagorinsky and O’Donnell-Allen (2000) complicate this view in their study of students’ talk in small groups in a high school English class. In their study, students are asked to take up a teacher’s dialogic bid and engage in small group talk in order to create a group-produced knowledge artifact. Some groups accepted O’Donnell-Allen’s dialogic bid and its implied theoretical stance: that we learn and build knowledge through conversation. However, other groups created their artifacts generally through the independent work of individuals, and with discourse “characterized by discourtesy or apathy” (p. 185). Smagorinsky and O’Donnell-Allen argue that when students’ and teachers’ goals for a classroom are incompatible, “the establishment of an open-ended, polydirectional instructional context provides a setting for students to act in ways that are counterproductive to the teacher’s goals for the class” (p. 185).
What Do Researchers Say About Talk, and Who Is Listening?

Overall, researchers interested in classroom discussion do share some beliefs about good classroom discourse. They believe that students’ voices must be central to the discussion, that students should learn from one another, and that by talking together, students should learn or grow. The differences in the studies seem to point to the range of ways in which these beliefs are operationalized and studied. The researchers’ methodological differences help us ask whether it is sufficient to pay attention to the talk itself, or if we must also pay attention to whether and how students use that talk to construct new knowledge. Further methodological differences help us ask whether it is sufficient to study discussions in and of themselves or whether it is necessary to consider discussions as literacy events that both form and are formed by the classroom’s larger literacy practices.

As I look across these studies both with the eyes of a former high school English teacher and with the eyes a future academic and/or classroom researcher, I am compelled to ask, “What parts of this rich research do teachers use to theorize the success or failure of their own use of classroom discussion as pedagogical practice?”

Mohr (1980), an advocate for teacher research, once wrote of herself as a teacher, “I shared a general teacher prejudice against educational research. Teachers do not have much time to read research journals and when they do, they are too tired to plow through jargon, charts, and statistics to find information that would improve their teaching” (p. 4). Knowing Mohr speaks for many teachers who do not consult educational research to find answers to their pedagogical queries, I also reviewed literature more readily available to and accessed by teachers: methods textbooks and
popular teachers' literature such as that produced by Stenhouse and Heinemann. The texts were selected as a representative sample from the Maine Writing Project's office. In these texts we can begin to see what kind of knowledge and language a typical high school English teacher might bring to his or her understanding of the nature of talk in the classroom. In this literature we generally see a summary of the first kind of research: who talks and how much. There is some discussion of what kind of learning takes place when students talk in class, but in it the theory is under-articulated and often mixed with other competing reasons for classroom discussion. Finally, there is virtually no discussion of how classroom discussion fits into the larger social context, which include the other literacy practices of this classroom, the school, students’ peer groups or communities.

**What Teachers Might Think:**

**A Review of Popular Texts for Secondary English Teachers**

Discussions of literature are one of the most distinctive features of life in English classrooms. In fact, if we could somehow categorize all of the different activities that English teachers orchestrate during class time – from assigning essays to assigning seats, from reading poetry to reading the morning announcements – it is likely that those discussions, *however we define them*, (emphasis added) would account for a large portion of our efforts and might event constitute the most frequent instructional practice in which we and our students engage (Beach & Marshall, 1991, p. 49).

A review of several methods texts or popular-press teacher texts provides an enlightening (and sometimes confusing) vision of the ideas about classroom talk and discussion that new teachers might take with them into their classroom, beginning with
this very idea that everything from “assigning seats” to “reading the morning announcements” counts as “discussion.”

**Who Talks and What Do They Say?**

A reader of methods textbooks would find some agreement, though perhaps not a lot of depth, as to what attributes one might look for as signs of success in the discussion. For instance, most teacher-educators seem to agree that discussion should include most if not all students (Burke, 2003; Christenbury, 2006; Henson, 1988). Also, there is agreement that while it is not the norm in current English language arts classes, successful discussions allow students to ask their own questions, not just answer the teachers’ (Beach & Marshall, 1991; Burke, 2003; Christenbury, 2006; Henson, 1988). Here we see a possible genesis of the kinds of thinking that led my colleagues and me to different conclusions. If the methods texts suggest that all students should be involved, then it makes sense for my first-year teaching colleague to count the number of students who participated. If the methods texts argue that students should ask their own questions, then perhaps a teacher could simply count the number of student-generated questions to judge the success of a class discussion.

**What is Learned?**

Beach and Marshall (1991) come closest in this look across popular teacher literature to talking about student learning when they argue that the best purposes for classroom talk is “to provide an opportunity for students and teachers to explore a topic collaboratively” (p. 58). Further, they argue that classroom discussion should serve as “an opportunity for students to use their own language as a way of welding new knowledge to old in collaboration with peers” (p. 62). Henson (1988) argues that while
"discussions give them [middle level students] room to express their opinions ... middle level students should use discussion to absorb more information, rather than merely disseminating their opinions" (pp. 58-59). Understanding what purposes are important to a teacher who is using classroom discussion is important to understanding what that teacher does to facilitate the discussion and what counts as participation in the discussion. A teacher who believes that students and teachers are "collaboratively exploring a topic" might be paying attention in class to how many students participate or looking for evidence of students' flexibility in thinking, while a teacher who sees classroom talk as providing opportunities for students to "absorb more information" might look for attributes such as good listening skills on the part of students or the ability to recall the information that they absorbed as signs of a successful discussion.

Other, perhaps secondary, purposes for holding classroom discussions are also offered across this range of methods text. For instance, discussions help students to develop social skills and help students identify with their peers (Burke, 2003; Christenbury, 2006; Henson, 1988). Discussions allow students to function as experts (Christenbury, 2006). Discussions give teachers immediate information about students' comprehension and learning (Beach & Marshall, 1991; Christenbury, 2006).

As we will see in much of the literature, methods texts offer teachers a wide range of purposes for holding classroom discussions. While all these purposes may add up to make an argument for the use of classroom conversations as a pedagogical tool, such a range of purposes may also be confusing to a teacher. Which purposes the teacher focuses on can very well determine what practices he or she engages in to promote and
sustain conversation, and such a difference in practice will change students’ understandings of what counts in the conversation.

**Social Contexts of Classroom Practice**

These methods and popular English teaching guides offer no discussion of how the purposes and methods of class discussion fit with the larger surround of other activities in which teachers might ask students to engage. It is possible that such an omission encourages teachers to engage in practices that are inconsistent or, as Applebee (1993) has described them, schizophrenic.

**What do Teachers Hear About the Research Concerning Classroom Discourse?**

To be fair, such texts must provide (in a few hundred pages at most), as Jim Burke’s (2003) title suggests, “A Complete Guide to Classroom, Curriculum and the Profession,” and therefore are necessarily limited in how much depth can be allotted to any particular topic. In the range of these texts I consulted, classroom discussions “however we define them” was allotted a range of one to twenty pages, most of which offered a number of reasons, thin on theoretical explanation, *why* discussion is important, followed by a number of suggestions about how to make those discussions successful and what attributes to look for in a successful discussion. These often behavior-oriented suggestions may leave teachers with a somewhat shallow understanding of why things like number of participants, number of turns, and number of student questions matter.

As in economics, I would argue, trickle-down theory doesn’t really work. However, if we look across both the research and the popular texts that speak to or about teachers using classroom discussion as a pedagogical tool, we can compile a list of suggestions that have been made to teachers. These will be useful in the analysis of this
teacher's moves in promoting classroom discussion. In the next session are some recommendations as to what teachers can do to lessen the risks and help students take up their roles and substantively engage in the dialogic classroom.

**What Teachers Might Do**

Both the methods textbooks and academic researchers offer suggestions as to methods that teachers might use to move their classrooms away from recitation toward high quality classroom discussions. The methods and popular teachers' press books seem focused on managing students' behaviors in the discussion. By contrast, research texts make suggestions focused on the interaction and intellectual work of the students, rather than on how many students speak or particular procedural behaviors.

*Give Students Time to Think*

The average amount of time teachers wait for students to respond to their questions (known as “wait time”) is one second. Likewise, teachers usually respond to student comments in less than one second (Rowe, 2003). Moore (2003) argues that when a teacher provides more wait time, the student's response is more thorough, involved and elaborated. Wait time has also been shown to improve teacher questioning and support for student thinking. McCann, Johannessen, Kahn, and Flannagan (2002) argue that improved wait time led to an increase in students' use of appropriate disciplinary language specific to the problem at hand. More wait time is believed to encourage student exploration and questions, and reduce dependence on teacher questions. Studies into the effects of wait time have divided wait time into three types. The first is waiting after a question is posed. Proponents of this method argue that waiting just a few seconds before asking for a respondent encourages everyone to consider the question. Calling on
someone before asking the question or immediately afterwards, they argue, removes the responsibility for thinking about the question from everyone else. The second kind of wait time is the provision of time to a student once he has been asked a question. The third is waiting after a student responds without commenting. This encourages students to think about the contribution and also increases the likelihood that other students will “uptake” the comment.

We can also provide time to think before beginning a discussion. I have suggested the “silent discussion” in which students write comments and questions before beginning a conversation (Wilhelm, Baker, & Dube-Hackett, 2001). Johannessen and Kahn (2005) suggest asking students to work in pairs or small groups before beginning a large-group discussion or asking them to write (or to use a combination of writing and small-group discussion).

Teach the Skills of Discussion

Just what do successful discussions of literature look like? What are students doing in a successful discussion? Several researchers argue that the way to increase successful participation is to explicitly teach students what people do in a discussion of literature – ask questions, follow up, refer to the text, solicit the opinions and ideas of others, for a few examples. Wilhelm et al. argue that these skills must be taught, practiced, reviewed and practiced some more (Wilhelm, Baker, & Dube-Hackett, 2001, p. 140). Johannessen and Kahn (2005) suggest, specifically, teaching students the differences among question types. Christenbury and Kelly (1983) recommend “the questioning circle” which Christenbury says “provides a logical, yet flexible, format for questioning” (2006, p. 245).
The questioning circle consists of three overlapping areas of knowledge that expert readers bring to bear when reading and talking about what they have read: knowledge of the matter, personal reality, and external reality. For literature, these three circles represent the text being read (matter), the reader (personal reality), and the world and/or other literature (external reality). These areas of knowledge also overlap. Christenbury and Kelly refer to the place where a reader or speaker uses all three of these kinds of knowledge as the "dense" area. Although this "dense" area represents the highest-order thinking, assimilating three domains of knowledge, Christenbury and Kelly believe that how and when students get to the dense question is flexible.

As I write in Strategic Reading, (Wilhelm, Baker, & Dube-Hackett, 2001) in my own teaching the questioning circle helped me devise questions about literature that were interesting and engaging to students, but which I also believe helped them think more critically and carefully about what they have read and about how that relates to their own lives and the world in which they live. In a class in American literature, for instance, we used the questioning circle throughout the year to help us connect all of the literature we read to an essential question "What does it mean to be an American." The "dense question" around each text might be some variation of "What does this text (the matter) say about being an American (external reality), and how do I feel about that (personal reality). Early in the school year, we read Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" and I used the questioning circles to develop discussion questions for the class. Students discussed Bartleby (the matter) with questions such as "What motivates Bartleby's behavior?" They connected that to their personal knowledge by discussing a question such as "How do you react to Bartelby? To the lawyer? With whom do you most
sympathize? Why?” They were further invited to connect their understanding of Bartelby to current events in discussing a question such as “Are there people or incidents in the news today who remind you of Bartelby? In what way?” We rounded out our understanding of the story, and of Melville’s themes by discussing this dense question: How do you think the world today responds to people like Bartelby? How do you feel about that? What might Melville have to say about it?” Further, I used the questioning circle as a framework for students to develop their own questions and take responsibility for the discussion. Later in the year students used the questioning circle framework to develop their own questions for discussion of texts such as Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*.

Question-answer relationships (QARs) are another technique recommended for teaching students about questioning. Developed by Raphael (1982) for elementary school readers, question-answer relationships highlight that readers must ask different kinds of questions, and that these question types require different kinds of work to answer. Raphael identifies two kinds of text-based questions: right-there and think-and-search. Right-there questions are literal questions that can be answered by finding directly stated information. Think-and-search questions are inference questions that require students to bring new information forward from one part of the text and connect it to new information later in the text. By putting the various pieces of information together, students can make a connection and an inference. Raphael also describes two other classes of questions that she calls “in my head” questions: author-and-me questions and on-my-own questions. In order to answer author-and-me questions, readers need to consider the story and their life experiences. In my own classroom, these questions were
often stated something like “What does the author think about X and how do I feel about that?” To answer on-my-own questions, students don’t need to have read the book at all. The story may have stimulated such a question, but is not necessary in answering it. I have often used on-my-own questions as “before and after” sorts of opinion questions.

Two summers ago when I was teaching Raphael’s questioning schema in a content area literacy course, one of my students, who was often a rabble-rouser, began to get a querulous look on his face. Ready for a fight, I asked him what he was thinking at that moment. An aspiring science teacher, he said, “These are like the last question in the end-of-the-unit questions. I NEVER answered those. They seemed too hard. I didn’t know HOW to. Why didn’t someone just explain this in-your-head question thing to me when I was in, like, fifth grade? That would have saved me a lot of trouble.” I agree. And in my teaching I did find that students found this questioning schema easy to learn and often explanatory.

Ask Authentic Questions

Nystrand and his colleagues (1996) define authentic questions as questions in which no single, right answer is expected as opposed to “already know the answer test questions” that teachers frequently ask. Christoph and Nystrand (2001), in studying a single teacher’s work to move toward a dialogic classroom, named four kinds of unauthentic questions asked by the teacher in their case study: recitation questions, which ask for specific answers; reminder questions, in which the teacher points students toward specific texts or experiences in order to produce the answer she is looking for; implied answer questions, in which there might, arguably, be more than one answer, but through her phrasing of the question students are pointed toward an answer she is looking for, and
guided prediction questions in which questions are framed by a certain way of looking at things ("so, given that definition..."). All of these types of questions are contrasted to her authentic discussion questions in which she opens the floor to multiple answers. Interestingly, Christoph and Nystrand point out that these questions contain linguistic clues to the fact that they are discussion questions: they contain more self corrections, are phrased conversationally, and ask for more than one student to respond (p. 15).

**Practice Uptake**

Uptake refers to a teacher restating a student's response or turning it into a question in order to prompt further elaboration. Johannessen and Kahn (2005) explain that uptake requires that teachers withhold evaluative comments, choosing instead a neutral comment such as "that's interesting," "that's another viewpoint," "That's a point we need to consider." Many researchers (Cazden, 1988; Christoph & Nystrand, 2001; Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995; Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1996) argue that uptake disrupts the normal monologic, teacher-controlled pattern of discourse in the classroom by purposefully seeing that student responses are taken up and extended.

**Minimize the Effect of the “Teacher as Expert”**

Newkirk (1984) argues that because teachers often use only the texts that they feel they have mastered, most literature instruction develops the myth of the "inspired reading," leaving students feeling as if meanings are "hidden" from them but "open to another class of readers – professional readers, teachers" (p. 756). Newkirk argues that when we share only polished readings, we suggest that these readings come easily to us, the struggle that we go through to develop them is lost. Indeed, I report in Strategic
Reading (Wilhelm, Baker, & Dube-Hackett, 2001) that as a teacher the myth of the “inspired reading” helped to add to my confidence as a teacher: At least I knew something that the students didn’t. Christoph and Nystrand (2001) argue that one of the main reasons their case study teacher was able to open a successful dialogic bid in the one conversational turn that they consider most successful, was that she was less familiar with the text that she was reading, and did not have a “commitment to a single, correct answer” to her question (p. 23). Many studies suggest that infusing the classroom with literature that the teacher has not read may work toward creating a greater sense of equality, and therefore, sense of efficacy in discussions of literature (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001; Connolly & Smith, 2002; Newkirk, 1984; Rabinowitz & Smith, 1998).

Create an Ethos of Involvement and Respect

Christoph and Nystrand (2001) argue that the teacher in their case study worked both inside and outside the discussion to foster this ethos of involvement and respect. They believe that she created an ethos of respect by talking to students outside the classroom before and after school and between classes, which allowed her to know them personally (about their jobs, about their families, etc). In the classroom she showed a willingness to “consider and sometimes adopt student’s suggestions” (p. 13). Rex and McEachen (Rex & McEachen, 1999) also make a similar case in their close examination of the opening days of McEachen’s English classroom that he creates an ethos of involvement and respect among the diverse student population of his classes by honoring and using student expertise in classroom discussions of literature.
Make Students’ Lives an Important Source of Knowledge

Langer (2002) tells us that effective teachers use student language and their experience beyond school to enrich academic coursework. Yet it may be particularly difficult for teachers to see the possibilities in students’ seemingly off-task behavior. While many teachers see students’ use of their personal lives in the classroom as distracting, Christoph and Nystrand (2001) argue that the very things that teachers see as interruptions are the things that make learning possible because “they bridge the lives of the students to the coursework in ways that are meaningful to the students” (p. 33). Some researchers believe that one way that a teacher might do that is to use more personal writing prompts (Marshall, 1989; Smith, 1996; White, 1999). Another, suggested by Jacobs (2001) based on work she did with her students, is the double-entry journal, in which students write a quote in the left-hand column of a journal page and their own response to the quote in the right. Jacobs found that these journal entries could be shared as a means of getting talk started.

Another strategy that has been suggested for equalizing the classroom is to ask “broader, more open-ended questions that focus on a key issue or interpretive problem” (Johannessen & Kahn, 2005). Mahar (2001) did this in her middle school classroom by framing her reading of The Giver with a study of Courage to Care, a text that explores “ways that individuals could make a significant impact on their society by following the tenets of social justice (p. 107). Students were not asked to read The Giver as an example of utopian/distopian novel, but rather as one example of a resource from which they were able to “extrapolate this interpretation into their own world” (p. 107).
The Current Study

Examining the deep, rich and multiple ways of looking at classroom discourse in the educational research in comparison to that part of the research that trickles down to teachers in the field helped me to more deeply understand the disconnect between teachers' beliefs and their actions represented in the Comeryas and DeGroff (1998) survey. This led me to want to work with a single teacher whose intentions were under-supported by his theories and practices. I hoped this study might help him, and perhaps help others, think about classroom discussions as a pedagogical tool, but also about the complicated interaction of belief, theory and practice of teachers in classrooms.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

I began collecting data for an entirely different dissertation. Classroom discussions were one data set of five. Jamie and I had agreed on all the data sets before hand, the number of times each would be collected, and where in the unit those collections would take place. As far as classroom discussions, we had agreed that we would tape one at the beginning, middle and end of each of two units in each of two classrooms for a total of twelve taped whole-class conversations. I was surprised by a number of things on those audio tapes, but most of all, I was surprised by the role the teacher took in many of those classroom conversations. I have watched him teach on a number of occasions. We worked together in the same school for three years; after that, I worked at the local university and supervised student teachers, a number of whom were placed in his class. He is a great teacher: smart, self-possessed, funny, and caring. This is completely evident in some of the tapes. He engages students, he listens to them, he follows their lead. Yet in other of the tapes, he sounds like that algebra teacher in Ferris Bueller’s Day Off, “anyone, anyone?” he intones, “You all have to speak.” After transcribing the first one I asked him, “How often do you use whole-class discussions in your teaching?”

“Oh,” he answered, “I don’t really. I don’t really like to. Honestly, I never feel like I know what I’m doing, or what the kids should be doing. I feel like I spend all my time managing bad behavior while their conversation ping-pongs all over the place. I feel
like I don’t even know what they’re talking about half the time. I just don’t really think it’s worth it.”

“Oh,” I said, “Why did you agree to use classroom discussions for these units, then?”

“Well,” he answered, “You asked me to. And I figured it couldn’t hurt. Maybe I’d even learn something.”

I went back to the proverbial drawing board, to my committee, and worked to figure out how we could study these conversations in order to help both Jamie and me understand what makes good classroom conversation and what teachers do, inside and outside of those conversations, to engender it.

From here, a research plan was built. I worked with Jamie to more precisely articulate his understandings of what made a good discussion, and looked at the 12 sample discussions to find the four discussions that he felt were the examples of himself and his students meeting those criteria. Finally, I examined those four transcripts on a variety of dimensions.

Method

Theoretical Frame

I approached this inquiry from a sociocultural perspective on literacy as a social practice (Barton & Hall, 1999). In this view, literacy is seen as a set of social practices observable in events and mediated by written texts. Literacy is not the same in all contexts. While many researchers in new literacy studies take an interest in home or vernacular literacies in comparison with school literacies, Moje (1996) points out that the structure of secondary schools, in which students move from classroom to classroom,
promotes the development of multiple classroom cultures or subcultures. In this sense, each classroom can be viewed as a unique social context within which teachers and students define and negotiate the rules, norms, and values that create a unique classroom culture. What counts as reading, writing, listening and speaking, then, is negotiated in each classroom by the teacher and his students over time and through the literacy episodes that unfold there.

This sociocultural perspective on literacy also operates from the tenet that literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals of the participants in those practices. As Smagorinsky and O'Donnell-Allen (2000) point out, teachers and students may, in fact, bring far different goals to any literacy event and then must negotiate the instructional space or even work at cross-purposes as they enact any literacy event together. Therefore, this perspective asks us to shift our focus from an individual's enactments of literacy to a focus on groups and how those groups regulate and are regulated by their shared literacy practices.

For the purposes of this study, I turn to Barton and Hall's definition of literacy practices as the activities of reading, writing, listening and speaking combined with the social structures in which they are embedded and which they help shape. In their words, "a literacy practice can be understood as the general, cultural way of using language, or 'what people do with literacy'" (Barton & Hall, 1999, p. 11). Literacy practices, according to new literacy theorists, can be understood by studying literacy events, observable episodes which arise from practices and are shaped by them. Literacy events are always social because they can only exist in a social context.
Classroom discussions of literature have been characterized as an important pedagogical practice in socio-constructivist classrooms. While many teachers tout a belief in whole-group conversations as important, many fewer actually commit much instructional time to whole-class discussions. Therefore, understanding why a teacher enacts this pedagogical move, describing successful classroom discussions as literacy events, and understanding how they shape and are shaped by the classroom’s literacy practice may provide insight into how to support teachers in more and more successful use of discussion as a pedagogical tool.

Time Frame, Setting, Participants

This study was conducted over the course of one semester; I attended class three days each week at the beginning of the semester of the 2005-2006 school year. As the semester went on and I knew the classroom procedures as well as the students, I began to attend two days most weeks. I worked with the teacher and his students over the course of 20 weeks.

The setting is a ninth-grade English classroom at a high school of approximately 900 students situated in a Maine community of approximately 35,000. The school and class populations are composed primarily of European-Americans from working- and middle-class backgrounds. Participants in the study include one teacher, Jamie Heans, and his students enrolled in two sections of ninth grade English, a requirement of all students at this high school.

Jamie has been chosen in a purposive manner (Miles & Huberman, 1994). He is entering his seventh year as a teacher. A social constructivist in theory, he is still working out in practice how to teach in a learning-centered way within an institution that
has traditionally been an information-centered one. Jamie is also my partner. Besides being married for thirteen years, we have teamed together for various research projects and courses, and have presented on our teacher-research together at national conventions and in local settings. Since I left the classroom, he has shared his, bringing home problems, challenges and ideas, and either trying new ideas I’ve cooked up in graduate school, or allowing me access to his classroom to try them myself. Working in Jamie’s classroom is the closest thing to action or teacher research that my current situation allows.

**Gaining Entrée.** Working at this site is an example of what Glesne and Peshkin (1992) refers to as “backyard research,” a kind of research setting about which she warns against. Besides working in my husband’s classroom, previous to this research situation, I had worked at this site as a high school English teacher for ten years. Glesne and Peshkin warn of the following possible problems of backyard research: that previous experience with the setting and people can set up expectations; that you already have a role in the setting and that role is not as a researcher; that you can find yourself in ethical and political dilemmas; that you may gain “dangerous knowledge” and that it is hard to “end” your research (pp. 26-28).

I take Glesne and Peshkin’s cautions seriously. Certainly I entered this situation with expectations of the school, the teacher (my husband), and the students. And certainly there have been bumps in the road because of the “backyard” nature of this research setting. In fact, we could say that the reason I am writing this dissertation and not the one I originally proposed is based on this very situation: that I was too close to the teacher to tell him to get back on track and teach what we had agreed to; that he was too
close to the researcher to say, “Hey, I don’t do whole-group instructional conversations.”

Still, I feel that in this situation, the benefits outweigh the costs. In fact, working with someone for whom I have such deep respect has helped to move me toward the idea expressed by Wollman-Bonilla (2002) “that I must use my influence as a researcher to serve others and their goals” (p. 320). I believe that my work with the National Writing Project also has helped me to appreciate my “responsibility to value and help others value the work (and the questions) of teachers” (Wollman-Bonilla, p. 320), but in much the same way that having a child of my own helped me to re-see the students in my class, working with my husband on this project helped me to re-see teachers as true participants in rather than subjects of research.

There were other benefits to this “backyard” research as well. As a member of the Penobscot River Educational Partnership, a professional development network (PDN) of local school districts, this school department has an ongoing relationship with the University of Maine, particularly with the College of Education and Human Development. The elementary schools in the partnership serve as a cohort site for the elementary education Master of Arts (MAT) students from the university for five years, and the district is committed to the PDN in other ways. The former superintendent has a strong belief in research and development. She strongly encourages any research that helps teachers to understand or think more about student literacy practices, and made reading a top priority for their improvement goals. She is glad that I have chosen to conduct my research at this site. In fact, I think she might have been offended if I chose to move my research site away from this school department. Furthermore, the students I
worked with did not know me as a teacher, as I am no longer employed there and they are brand new to the school.

More importantly, both the teacher and the school district most meet my desire to do research that provides reciprocity. Patton (1990) describes reciprocity as an "exchange relationship" in which participants "find something that makes their cooperation worthwhile" (p. 257). In this case, Jamie and I hope that this "something" will be useful feedback and assistance in understanding effective methods of leading classroom discussions that "go somewhere" (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995). The school district hopes that such conversations will build into their overall goals for improving literacy in the district. Overall, the benefits, in this case, outweigh the dangers of backyard research. Therefore, I believe that my home school district seems an appropriate, even fitting, place for me to conduct research. Still, I have continued to use my research journal to note any concerns about backyard research that might arise.

**Consent.** Although my research does not delve into personal issues, and there is little danger connected with participation, there are always human subject concerns in research. Because my research participants are minors, they and their parents were asked to read and sign the informed consent agreement (Appendix A). It was very important to make clear in this case that the choice to participate or not in this research study is entirely independent of their English-class grade.

**Role of the Researcher.** In this research, I write about particular elements of Jamie's teaching. I do so from my role as a co-researcher and participant observer. While I spent the first part of my time mainly as an observer, I also worked with Jamie to develop a unit introducing the ninth graders to critical literary theory. We also talked
(incessantly, according to our then six year old daughter) about the class, how it was
going, what should maybe happen next, throughout the semester. Later we talked (in a
semi-structured interview) about the transcripts themselves, working out what we
understand to make an effective instructional conversation.

**Data Sources and Collection**

The primary data sources for this study are 12 taped classroom conversations. I
also worked from field note observations collected during my 45 classroom observations
during the first semester of the 2005-2006 school year. Documents, including class
assignments and students’ written responses to those assignments, were collected. A
formal semi-structured interview with Jamie is also part of the data set.

**Participant Observation.** As a participant observer, I kept field notes throughout
this study. These notes helped to establish the context of this study, track student
behaviors, and record both descriptions and analytical notes. Furthermore, the field note
journal served as a place to monitor my own subjectivity (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p.
102). My main goal for classroom observation was to understand the “research setting,
its participants and their behavior” (Glesne & Peshkin, p. 45). As I collected data from
the taped classroom discussions, classroom observations helped me to better understand
the setting of this classroom and the relationships among the students and between the
students and the teacher. They provided records of some of the participants’ behavioral
responses not recorded by the tape recorder, and they enabled me to recognize students’
voices and imagine students’ posture and body language even when I listened to the
tapes.
Student Assignments. I collected reading journals, writing prompts assigned to prepare for classroom discussion, and other writing about literature. In many cases students were asked to complete writing assignments or small-group tasks before classroom discussions. These were collected to help us understand the conditions and initiating events that seemed to generate the most successful discussions.

Teacher Interview. In the first level of analysis I asked Jamie to use tapes of his classroom discussions to surface features of a successful classroom discussion. After agreeing to host 12 whole class discussions of literature over the course of one semester, Jamie reviewed the tapes of these discussions and chose the four transcripts that he felt represented the best whole group discussions of literature.

I transcribed the interview and then read the transcript of it once looking for salient ideas. The first reading yielded a set of nine major topics: fluency, insightful answers, debate, on-topic, into-it, connections, participation, learning, teacher moves. I read the transcripts a second time and color-coded any references to any of the nine topics or themes. I listed words or phrases that seemed connected to the themes. After reading and notetaking several more times, I began to believe that this list of terms could be collapsed into two meta-topics in Jamie’s talk about classroom discussions: characteristics of talking behavior (who talks? What is the length and nature of their turns?) and characteristics of the content (Are the remarks on topic? Do they make connections? Are they insightful?)

As a member check I shared these characteristics with him to see if he agreed that these represented his thinking about what makes a good discussion. These characteristics and his descriptions of them are shared in Chapter 4.
**Classroom Discussions.** As part of the curriculum of the ninth grade English class, Jamie teaches two instructional units in the first semester. Both are thematically organized around inquiry questions. During one of the units, students read a variety of literature, including *Gilgamesh* and excerpts from Homer’s *Odyssey* in order to explore the hero’s quest and answer the question “What makes a hero?” In the other unit students read several poems and short stories, as well as *Romeo and Juliet* in order to answer the question: “What makes a good relationship?” Before the semester began Jamie and I agreed on a number of assignments that would be collected as data sets. One set of data that we agreed on was classroom conversations. Jamie agreed that at the beginning, the middle and the end of each of these units, one class period in each of the two classes under study would be devoted to preparing for and participating in a whole-class discussion of a text, part of a text, a set of texts, or the theme. Each of these classroom conversations would be taped and student work before or after the conversation would be collected. These 12 taped conversations are the heart of the data of this study.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

In “Does Anybody Really Care: Research and its Impact on Practice” Wollman-Bonilla (2002) argues that in order to do research “for schools instead of against them” researchers should describe what teachers are doing well and how they are doing it. Doing so, she argues, “does not mean avoiding the realities of classroom practices that may not work, or that seem problematic, or that could be improved. But it means confronting these issues nonjudgementally and with openness to understanding teachers’ and children’s thinking” (p. 324). She goes on to argue for researchers to move away from the argument of generalizability and rather to see their work as presenting...
illustrative cases, “examples of what works, possibilities suggested by successful cases” (p. 325). The focus of my data analysis was to discern what this teacher set out to accomplish through whole-group discussions of literature, to make visible the moments in his classroom when the use of discussions had seemed most successful, and to explore what the teacher had done inside and around those most successful moments in order to foster these successes. I applied multiple methods to achieve these understandings.

**Teacher Interview.** I asked Jamie to use transcripts of his classroom discussions to surface features of a successful classroom discussion. After agreeing to host 12 whole class discussions of literature over the course of one semester, Jamie reviewed the tapes of these discussions and chose the four that he felt represented the best whole group discussions of literature. These discussions were transcribed. The discussions represented in these four transcripts become “telling cases” of successful discussions that Jamie thinks with in order to describe the salient qualities of a good classroom discussion.

I transcribed the interview and then read the transcript once looking for themes. The first reading yielded a set of nine themes, which I then read for evidence of. In this next reading, I color-coded the interview for these themes and listed words or phrases that seemed connected to the themes. A review of this list of themes suggested that they could be collapsed to two meta-topics in Jamie’s talk about classroom discussions: characteristics of talking behavior (Who talks? What is the length and nature of their turns?), and characteristics of the content (Are the remarks on topic? Do they make connections? Are they insightful?).
As a member check, I shared these characteristics back with him to see if he agreed that these represented his thinking about what makes a good discussion.

Transcripts. I generally followed a key to transcription described by Chang and Wells (1998) in *Oracy Matters*. Each conversational turn begins on a new line and if more than one line is required to complete a turn, continuation lines are not indented. Incomplete utterances or false starts are shown with a dash. Pauses are indicated with a period. In the case of long pauses, the number of periods corresponds with the length of the pause. In the case of extended pauses, the word **pause** is given a separate line and enclosed in brackets. Italics are used for words spoken with emphasis. Passages that are impossible to transcribe are represented by parentheses such as (lost) or (mumbling). When two speakers speak at once, the overlapping portions of their talk are underlined. The teacher is indicated in the transcripts by the designation “teacher.” Students are represented by their first initial. In the case where a teacher or student names another student, that student’s name has been changed.

In order to describe each of these four discussions as literacy events in a way that would make visible those moments of success as Jamie had described them, I worked from the attributes of high quality discussion named by the teacher, and set out to analyze the transcripts of the four classroom conversations that he named the best, in order to understand and explain the possibilities suggested by these successful cases. To examine and represent the basic features of the discussions he chose as the best, I used the coding system that Marshall (1989) developed, and Marshall, Smagorinsky, and Smith (1995) used in their combined studies which appear in *The Language of Interpretation*. As noted in chapter two, there are many areas of consensus about the criteria for a good
discussion: It must involve students in a richer and more substantive way than does the traditional recitation pattern and students must grow. Marshall's coding system provides a lot of information about what happens inside the classroom discussion. Also, while this coding scheme can capture for us only the descriptions of what happened inside each discussion, or literacy event, this is a good fit with the way Jamie talked about classroom discussions. As we will see in chapter four, many of Jamie's descriptions express such attributes as length and number of turns, the kinds of knowledge students bring to and use in the discussion, and the ability of students to take on multiple roles or tasks inside the discussion. Finally, Marshall's coding scheme has already been used in a number of studies about what is happening and what might happen in discussions about literature inside and outside the classroom. Using this coding scheme allows us to join a conversation already begun and to make comparisons from this data set to several others.

Working with Marshall's (1989) data analysis procedure, I began by dividing transcript into episodes. Episodes are a sequence of speaker turns on a single, identifiable topic. Measuring the length of episodes and the number of speaker turns per episode allowed us to capture the depth of engagement and the number of students who participated with one another. Next we looked at speaker turns, which include everything a speaker says until she stops talking, and communication units, which are statements within speaker turns that were coded for analysis. I analyzed each communication unit for its linguistic function, for knowledge base, and for kind of reasoning. This coding scheme allowed us to quantify some of the descriptions Jamie made of successful classroom discussions.
In order to examine the linguistic patterns and intellectual content of classroom discussions, each communication unit was coded within one of five basic categories and within one of several subcategories that allowed a closer analysis of its features. The major categories and their subcategories are explained below.

1. Direct. Any remark that intends to move others toward an action or to shift their attention or the focus of the discussion. (examples: everyone move your desks into a circle. Let’s move on to Ty’s question.)

2. Inform. Any statement of fact or opinion whose purpose is to represent what the speaker knows, believes or thinks about a topic. Reading and quoting from a text are included here.

   A. Nature of remark

   i. Classroom logistics: refers to the management of classroom activities such as homework assignments, roll, etc.

   ii. Text rendering: refers to reading or quoting from the text

   iii. Instructional statements: refers to the substantive issues under discussion.

   1. All remarks coded as instructional were further analyzed for knowledge source and kind of reasoning.

   a. Knowledge source

   i. Personal-autobiographical (information drawn from the teacher’s own experience

   ii. Text (information drawn from the text under study)
iii. Text-in-context (information about the author of the text, the historical period in which it was written or its genre)

iv. General knowledge (information drawn from the media or contemporary culture that is widely available)

v. Previous class discussions, lectures, or readings

vi. Other

b. Kind of reasoning

i. Summary-description (statements which focus on the literal features of an experience or text)

ii. Interpretation (statements which make an inference about the meaning or significance of information)

iii. Evaluation (statements that focus on the quality of an experience or a text)

iv. Generalization (statements that move toward theoretical speculation about the nature of characters, authors, and texts).

v. Other
3. Question: Any verbal move that invites or requires a response from another participant
   
   A. Nature of question
      
      i. Classroom logistics
      
      ii. Instructional focus – If a question was coded as instructional, it was further analyzed for the knowledge source and level of reasoning it meant to elicit. Definitions for subcategories are the same as those for informational statements

      1. Knowledge source
         
         a. Personal-autobiographical
         
         b. Text
         
         c. Text-in-context
         
         d. General knowledge
         
         e. Previous instruction
         
         f. Other

      2. Kind of reasoning
         
         a. Summary-description
         
         b. Interpretation
         
         c. Evaluation
         
         d. Generalization
         
         e. Other

   4. Respond: Any verbal move that acknowledges, restates, evaluates, or otherwise reacts to the nature, quality, or substance of preceding remarks. Responses
clearly focus on the form or substance of the preceding remark. Answers to questions are coded in the “inform” category. A remark coded as a response to a question would ask for clarification or explanation of the question itself or would comment on the value of the question.

A. Nature of Response

i. Acknowledgement (simple indication that a remark was heard)

ii. Restatement (an effort to repeat a previous remark)

iii. Positive evaluation (a positive comment on a previous remark)

iv. Negative evaluation (a negative comment on a previous remark)

v. Request for explanation-elaboration-clarification (any remark that asks the previous speaker to speak more clearly or at greater length)

vi. Elaboration upon a previous remark (any remark that moves beyond a simple restatement of a speaker’s contribution by substantively changing the original speaker’s language or by offering an interpretation of what the speaker is saying)

vii. Other

5. Other: anything that cannot be coded within one of the four major categories.

I did the coding of the transcripts by hand, by creating a chart into which each communication unit could be entered and categorized. After I completed the first transcript, I asked Michael Smith to review my coding and answer some questions that I had about the coding scheme. I re-coded that first transcript and asked Michael to look at it again. After that, I shared several sections of coded transcripts with Michael as a
reliability check. I also asked Jamie to code a set of six pages of transcript as another reliability check.

After coding the classroom discussions in order to quantify and qualify the amount and type of talking that the teacher and students are doing in these selected discussions, I selected interactional segments during which the teacher’s or the students’ roles seemed important, significant, or markedly different. To make such a distinction, I took my cues from two sources: Jamie’s interview and the coding analysis. If Jamie mentioned a passage several times that he had found compelling, I returned to it to try to see what the analysis and my field notes added to his description. I also looked at the coded transcripts themselves. If the data revealed something significantly different from what other studies have described, I used Jamie’s words and my notes to develop a clear picture of that section of the text. I could then read across these “telling texts” (Rex & McEachen, 1999) to theorize patterns among these events and how these events shaped and were shaped by the literacy practices of this classroom. In other words, we looked at the moments that Jamie defined as “best” and tried to unpack what made those moments different from others. See Appendix B for an example of coded data.

Trustworthiness

Merriam (2002) points out that when people ask of a qualitative study whether or not it is “good” they generally mean “whether the study was conducted in a rigorous, systematic, and ethical manner, such that the results can be trusted” (p. 24). Throughout this chapter I have tried to describe my data collection, organization and analysis in a thorough way such that anyone who wanted to attempt such a study could replicate the
work. Below I reemphasize several strategies that I used in order to promote validity and reliability.

**Triangulation.** Internal validity, as described by Merriam, (2002), “asks the question How congruent are one’s findings with reality?” or “Are we measuring what we think we are measuring?” (p. 25). I worked to triangulate the data through three methods of triangulation: Using multiple sources of data, using multiple methods, and using multiple reviewers.

To get to the point at which I believed I could reasonably provide a descriptive representation of the classroom’s discussion practices, I needed multiple sources of contextualizing data. While the transcripts of classroom discussions provided the bulk of the data of this study, I compared what I could hear on those tapes with classroom observation field notes, and listened to them with a lens created through an interview with the classroom teacher. Further, I analyzed the literate artifacts (e.g. assignments, timed writings, reading log entries) produced by the teacher and the students in preparation for and/or in conclusion of the classroom discussions. In addition, I analyzed patterns across the events describing routinized academic and procedural practices. My analyses of these routines of practice made visible the rules for social engagement and academic performance to achieve “situated competence” (Rex & McEachen, 1999).

The classroom discussions themselves were analyzed first by Jamie, who in an interview with me, provide a descriptive review of the tapes that he had listened to, and then again by me using Marshall’s (1989) coding scheme.

Jamie was also involved in the analytic process. First, we used a random number generator to choose a starting place and pulled 5 consecutive pages from the 46 pages of
transcripts that I analyzed, and Jamie applied the same analytic procedure to this 20% of the transcripts. Jamie also regularly assessed my retrospective interpretations of his pedagogical moves and the meanings of particular discourse actions that I retrospectively brought to his attention. Furthermore, one member of my dissertation committee worked closely with me as I began coding the transcript data and then provided regular peer review of the coding as well as of the analyses represented in Chapter Four.

**Audit Trail.** In order to increase reliability, or the sense that the results are consistent with the data collected, and that the results reported here are dependable and consistent, I have tried to share a clear audit trail with my dissertation committee. In reporting the results, I have endeavored to provide rich, thick descriptions of the classroom context and the discussions that took place in it. This chapter provides a detailed account of the methods and procedures of carrying out this study. Below I have included a coda, written by Jamie, briefly describing his experience of the data collection and analysis.

Taken together, these interrelated methods of data collection, selection, analysis and triangulation provide a multifaceted representation of the discourse practices in this ninth grade English classroom. In chapter four I will present the findings of these several levels of analyses.

**Coda By Jamie Heans**

Using my ninth grade classes, Tanya and I recorded classroom conversations between students and facilitators to examine what moves are made and what is gained through class discussion. Taping the conversations involved using a condensor microphone and a laptop with GarageBand to record the class discussion. The challenge
was in getting a clear audio recording in a room with twenty students. Recordings were exported to compact disk and backed up on my laptop. I listened to all twelve classroom discussions and ranked the top four and stated the strengths and weaknesses of each.

Next, I was interviewed by Tanya about the top four conversations and was asked to explain what specifically made each of the top four stand out as exemplary discussions. Details such as the flow, number of student exchanges, student generated connections, references to assigned reading, my prompting and, student insight were features that emerged.

Tanya asked me to code a set of data to compare with her coding. She gave me six pages of a transcript. I looked at each student turn, and divided it into communication units, then I was asked to code each communication unit for what kind of turn it was and what kind of thinking it represented.

My involvement in this research proved to be informative, humbling, and sometimes pleasantly surprising. I gained significant new insights into the dynamics of class discussion and the ways in which students respond. I see now that students do surprising things and that in naming the moves they make, the teacher is able to more clearly understand how to facilitate. I also see that often students make comments that could potentially move a discussion into valuable thinking and exchanges, and the facilitator has to be able to recognize and name the response in order to help it be grabbed and developed as other students expand and connect. I liked when students went beyond the text we were discussing. I understand that classroom discussions are more than a review of concepts, character and plot. I continue to believe that one of the most challenging activities for a teacher is the management of classroom discussion.
CHAPTER FOUR
RESULTS

In this chapter I will present findings from two levels of analyses to consider the two focal questions of this dissertation

- How does this classroom teacher define the attributes of a good classroom discussion?
- What did this teacher do, inside and outside the discussion, to foster classroom discussions that have such attributes?

As an informant, Jamie represents a subset of teachers surfaced in Comeryas and DeGroff’s 1998 survey study who believe the idea of holding classroom discussions of literature, but who rarely uses this pedagogical “move” in their classrooms. Jamie believes that this disconnect between his belief and his practice is, for him, rooted in a perceived sense of failure in his attempts to initiate and sustain classroom discussions of literature. Therefore, it seemed both respectful and helpful to ask Jamie to review his work in order to see what was working.

In the first level of analysis, Jamie listened to tapes of his classroom discussions of literature, chose the four best discussions, and named the features of a successful classroom discussion that he saw in them. Table one represents those four discussions, in rank order (one being best), and descriptions of successful discussion that he named.

While Jamie can and does name the qualities of a good discussion based on these cases, and while many of these qualities sound like those that have been named by researchers in the field, he seems, in the interview, to struggle in trying to sort out and describe the terms he uses. The activity of being involved in this study, the very act of considering his work through the lens of the researcher’s questions, seems to be creating
new ideas and/or new connections among ideas he already holds. In truth, throughout the interview, Jamie is often putting name to his gut instincts or intuitions for the first time and/or in a new way.

Table 1 Rank, Title, Date and Description of Jamie’s Four Best Discussions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>What is a Hero?</td>
<td>November 4, period 3</td>
<td>End of the “What is a hero” unit, students talked in groups and then joined the whole group – student generated the first question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>What is a Hero?</td>
<td>November 4, period 5</td>
<td>End of the “What is a hero” unit, students talked in groups and then joined the whole group – student generated the first question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>What kind of man is Gilgamesh?</td>
<td>October 5, period 3</td>
<td>Middle of “What is a hero” unit after reading <em>Gilgamesh</em>. Students were each given a passage from the text and worked alone to prepare an answer to the question “What does this tell us about what kind of man Gilgamesh is?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>What makes a good relationship?</td>
<td>Feb 4, period 5</td>
<td>End of the “What makes a good relationship?” unit. Students were given a set of discussion questions to work with in small groups, and then moved to the large group discussions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because Jamie’s intuitions are not fully formed, at times are conflated with one another and are sometimes unclear, even to himself. He says at one point, "my impression was that it [a discussion] hadn’t gone well, but then when I look at it and I see what different kids said, and I see that they had insight.” I undertake another level of investigation into these four telling cases by interrogating the discussions themselves, through the use of a coding scheme developed by Marshall (1989) and used by Marshall, Smagorinsky and Smith (1995) in their collection of studies on classroom discourse. This second level of analysis is helpful in untangling some key ideas about discussions that
seem to get conflated in Jamie’s descriptions and in uncovering new ways of seeing the
discussions as well. The comparison of the two lenses for looking at the cases may also
lend insight into how and why classroom discussions feel slippery, by which I mean
difficult to use and/or to evaluate, to teachers.

**Attributes of a Good Classroom Discussion of Literature:**

**Who Talks and What Do They Say?**

After Jamie chose four transcripts that he found represented the best of these
classroom conversations about literature, I interviewed him about the transcripts and his
reasons for choosing them. These characteristics and his descriptions of those
classroom characteristics are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2 Characteristics of a Good Discussion as Defined by the Teacher**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of talking behavior</td>
<td>Fluency</td>
<td>Conversation seems to flow among students and does not require, or include, the teacher’s prodding for analysis or explanation of students’ responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>It wasn’t the same kids talking, no one is left just listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>Students not only participate, but seem invested, the conversation is lively, students “seem into it” not reluctant to participate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Debate</td>
<td>Students engage one another by disagreeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of the content of the discussion</td>
<td>Topical</td>
<td>Students talk about the concepts central to the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student Insight</td>
<td>Students demonstrate understanding of the text or of their own thinking or learning. Students go beyond answering others’ questions to demonstrating conceptual knowledge. Students explain their thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Connections</td>
<td>Connects the content to other content from the course (makes connections between two texts) or connects content to personal or popular culture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

55
Characteristics of Talking Behavior

The Teacher Says. We will begin thinking about the conversations through Jamie’s descriptions by trying to unpack some of the descriptors he uses when talking about who talks during the classroom discussion of literature.

Fluency. The first descriptor Jamie used to describe participation in good conversation was “fluency” (a term he used four times) which he immediately described by saying, “and what I mean by that is as a teacher how much did the kids actually discuss on their own without my having to prod, and, you know, pull out answers from them.” He focuses much of his description of who talks on this idea of teacher prodding, but he also goes on to describe the idea of “fluency” in a number of other ways, including saying that fluency is seen in quick and lively exchanges, seamless (and teacherless) transitions, and students asking each other questions. In his talk about “fluency,” Jamie, whether he knows it explicitly or not, is in line with all of the researchers (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995; Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1996; Rex & McEachen, 1999) who contrast a “fluent,” or dialogic, conversation in which students take turns with one another, with the more typical monologic or “I-R-E response pattern” of classroom discourse, in which the floor is returned to the teacher after each student turn. At the most basic level Jamie seems to be talking about the ratio of teacher-to-student turns, and perhaps about the length of episodes in which students are able to sustain turn-taking among themselves on a particular topic; therefore, when we turn to the transcripts themselves, we will code them to see what they reveal about the ratio of student-to-teacher talk.
However, Jamie sees this ability of students to participate in the discussion deeply connected to the teacher’s moves, and particularly to something Jamie refers to as the “prod.” The antithesis to fluent conversations, in Jamie’s terms, seems to be the teacher “prod,” a term he repeats six times. As he looks over the transcripts, he describes a conversation which he didn’t feel had much “fluency.”

I prod too much in this, is why it gets rated low. And the thing that put it low is that I’m in there almost as much as the kids are, and I think that’s kind of excessive. I’m not waiting for things to unfold, I’m kind of like prodding them. What is a teacher prod? Jamie gives the following examples: “Prod, you know, pull out, pull out answers from them” and “without prodding . . . without the teacher having to say, ‘Well, what about. . . .’” Also, he says, “a lot of prodding, like on the fourth page, I’m in here one, two, three, four times, prodding, and I keep repeating the question.” Prods, according to Jamie, seem to be moments in which the teacher calls on a student, pushes someone to answer a question, asks and, especially, repeats a question.

Further unpacking of his language around teacher prodding can help us to understand why he feels these moves are counterproductive. He seems to feel, as he looks retrospectively at the transcripts, that his contributions undermine possible student moves in the conversation. For instance, he says, “I question why I am jumping in at certain points when I could have probably just sat still and let things happen.” Later he goes on to give an example of what might happen if a teacher is able to keep from jumping in: “I provide the explanation, and I’m sure if I’d waited someone else could have come up with it.” When we turn to the transcripts, we will use Marshall’s coding
scheme to unpack the kinds of turns the teacher takes to see if such an analysis can deepen our understanding of how to describe and think about the “prod.”

Besides being free of teacher interference, Jamie also describes “fluent” conversations as “quick” or “lively,” as in the following descriptions. “The teacher doesn’t have to do much, there’s talk about vigilantes, can a hero be a vigilante, the qualities of Odysseus, but the exchanges in this one were fairly quick.” And again, “I just thought it was a lively exchange” or as he says here, “again, lively debates that got at the essence of does it matter, what is a warrior.” He names some other qualities of the way participants talk as well: participation, engagement, and debate. While all of these are, at times, implicated in his speaking about fluency, we will briefly deal with each of them separately.

**Participation.** It seems important to Jamie that all the students participate in these classroom conversations. He says at one point, “Everyone is required to add something. There are always going to be some who do more than others, but nobody is left sitting quiet. Nobody is idle through the whole thing.” He also likes moments in the discussion that seem to spur new students to participate. He says of one discussion, “And it wasn’t just the same kids talking, I liked that.” Jamie, then, seems to have as a goal of classroom discussions, increasing the number of students who participate and making more even the participation among students.

**Engagement.** Jamie’s term “engagement” is often directly linked to fluency, and yet also seems to warrant its own description. He tells us that students are engaged when “it sounded like they were into it,” a condition he also often linked to debate, which we will take up in the next section. Near the end of his interview he linked engagement with
learning outcomes when he said, “My feeling is they might grab onto something, ‘you know, you’re right, so-and-so was selfish, but he had to be’ but I think it depends on how engaged they are.” Here Jamie seems to echo Nystrand’s (Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1996) differentiation between procedural and substantive engagement – going through the motions of participation is not enough, you actually have to be substantively engaged for a discussion to change your thinking or allow you to see new ideas.

**Debate.** Jamie’s interview contains the word “debate” five times. While it is often tied to his ideas about fluency and engagement, it also is mentioned enough to be explored itself. He says, for instance, that “there’s a lot of debate about the qualities of a hero” and “lively debates that got at the essence of ‘does it matter.’” In another example, he states, “They were wrestling with that, they were debating a little bit.” In these passages Jamie names “debate” as a behavior, but it is also clearly closely linked to the content of the discussions – a condition in which students look at “qualities” get at the “essence” of things. He compares these conditions to a discussion in which there is no debate “It’s more of a shared analysis, but not much debate,” so while we will look for evidence of the behavior, in the next section we will also try to uncover how debate is related to the kind of content in the discussion.

For now, in looking at the nature of the behavior of the participants in a discussion, we can say that Jamie seems to feel in reading the transcripts of the conversations that characteristics of successful discussions are evidenced by exchanges in which students speak to, ask questions of, and even argue with each other. He describes, “. . . them asking each other some questions, and some debate, it sounded like they were
into it.” Also, he describes a “fluent” passage by saying, “there were some good
questions.” Beyond simply counting turns, then, Jamie begins here also to differentiate
the kinds of turns students might take. For instance, asking questions or responding to
one another. Marshall’s coding scheme will again give us further kinds of moves to
consider as well as helping us count students’ questions and responses to one another.

The Transcripts Say. We turn, then, to a number of analyses of the transcripts,
both to see whether they bear out Jamie’s intuition or gut responses and his descriptions
of what was happening in these discussions, and to see whether these analyses can lend
more language to Jamie’s own descriptions. We will begin by looking at both the number
and length of speaker turns to help us unpack Jamie’s ideas of “fluency.”

Speaker turns. One way that Jamie sees success in classroom discussions of
literature is when the students speak more than the teacher. The most straightforward way
to look at the discussions in this light, then, is simply to count the number of teacher and
student turns.

Table 3 Number of Turns by Speaker

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussion</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 What is a hero? (end of unit, period 3)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>1:5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2 What is a hero (end of unit, period 5)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>1:9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3 What kind of man is Gilgamesh (period 3)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>1:2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4 What makes a good relationship (end of unit, per 5)</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>1:2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As seen in Table 3, the patterns of turn-taking among teachers and students during these four discussions ranked by Jamie as the most effective are different from those reported in a number of earlier studies of classroom discourse (Cazden, 1988; Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995).
While those studies found turns fairly evenly distributed among teachers and students, with students counted as a group, these discussions all have student turns exceeding teacher turns. The traditional even distribution of teacher and student turns has been interpreted to suggest that in most classroom discussions of literature the floor is returned to the teacher after each turn (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995, p. 37). Here, in every one of the discussions most favored by the teacher, student turns outnumber teacher turns; in Jamie’s two favorite discussions the ratio was approximately 5 student turns to every teacher turn, and approximately 9 student turns to every teacher turn in his first and second choices of discussion. This analysis would suggest that Jamie’s terms can be quite easily fitted onto the terms researchers have used to describe successful discussions, and that coding of the transcripts supports his sense that these discussions stand out from others in this particular way. Of course, if Jamie’s primary quality of good discussions was number of student turns, we would expect him to have chosen discussion number two as his favorite. Further analyses will make visible other important characteristics of the discussion Jamie ranked number one. In the meantime, it is worth noting that while the ratio of teacher to student turns is one marker of the success or failure of a discussion, the teacher who stops her analysis at this characteristic will miss much.

**Communication Units Per Turn.** Marshall et al. (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995, p. 37) argue that a more telling indication of teachers’ and students’ relative contributions to discussions is provided by the average number of communication units per participant turn, that is, the number of statements coded within each turn. They describe a communication unit in this way: “The basic unit of analysis, communication
units have the force of a sentence, though may be as short as one word (for example, "yes" or "okay"). They represent an identifiable remark or utterance on a single subject” (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995, p. 10). These researchers found that in most classroom discussions, teachers’ turns were, in general, two to five times longer than students’ turns. While Jamie doesn’t specifically mention the difference in length of student and teacher turns, and, in fact, his description of “lively” and “quick” exchanges might suggest that he favors shorter turns, we will see in the next section that he also values “dense” turns which could be interpreted to mean longer turns. Therefore, it is worth following Marshall’s lead to see whether students not only took more turns, but whether they also have a significant number of communication units in comparison to the teachers’. Table 4 shows the mean number of communication units with turns by the speaker.

Table 4 Mean Number of Communication Units Within Turns by the Speaker

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussion</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is a hero? (end of unit, period 3)</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is a hero? (end of unit, period 5)</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What kind of man is Gilgamesh? (per 3)</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What makes a good relationship? (end of unit, per 5)</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The findings about length of turn, as measured in communication units, are the most difficult to understand and explain in terms of these four discussions serving as telling cases of good discussions. While the averages for these discussions are not remarkable (in two of the four cases the teacher’s turns are, on average, longer than
student turns), they are decidedly different from the trend reported by Marshall et al. (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995), who showed teacher turns generally to be much longer than student turns. In the cases presented here in which the teacher’s turns are generally longer than students’ turns it is by a much smaller margin than reported in these studies (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995). And in one discussion, students’ turns are approximately twice as long as the teacher’s turns.

Still, why doesn’t the discussion with the highest rate of student communication units rise to the level of first choice? There are several explanations for these findings. First, to look at the length of teacher turns in the first- and second-ranked discussions is to be deceived by the average. In these two discussions the teacher begins with one very long turn. In the number-one ranked discussion, this turn is 12 communication units long. The next longest turn is 5 communication units. The long opening turn skews the average length of teacher turns. If one takes that turn out, the teacher’s average number of communication units drops to 1.5 – the same length in this discussion as the average student turn.

The “What Kind of Man Is Gilgamesh?” discussion, with the longest average student- turns, might be expected to have rated higher in the teacher’s ranking. However, this discussion is markedly different from the other three, in that the preparation and directions for this discussion were different. In preparation for this discussion, each student was given a passage from the text and asked to be able to share his or her passage and explain how it seemed to be related to the question of what kind of man Gilgamesh was. Student turns, then, often involved at least one, and sometimes more than one, communication unit, which was reading or retelling their passage. Therefore, while the
turns look significantly longer than turns in the other discussions Jamie favored, this may simply be due to their reading or summarizing the passages they were assigned.

In spite of having downplayed these longer student turns, it is worth looking more closely at one excerpt of this discussion to see what sorts of talking students were doing in these longer turns. The following excerpt, drawn from discussion number three, shows a series of students taking long (several communication units each) turns.

G: Well, I have the time before he like lives (unclear) and everything. Um, this one it says, “as he pushes people half to death with working, with work rebuilding Urik’s walls, and with,” oh wait, “and then without any explanation let the walls go unattended and decay and left his people dreaming of the past and longing for a change. They had grown tired of his contradictions and his callous ways they knew his world was old and cluttered with spoiled arts but they defeated but could not revive.”

From that I got that he was really selfish and he doesn’t want change, I guess, I don’t know… and he wasn’t fair to his people, he was not a nice person. . . .

Yeah

WS: Well, I (unclear) he is a tyrant to people he doesn’t know and he is a totally different person at, to men and women he does know.

G: I had, um, yeah, I agree, that he was selfish because mine kinda fits in now because, “as king, Gilgamesh was a tyrant to his people, he demanded from an old birthright the privilege of sleeping with their brides before the husbands were permitted.” So basically, Gilgamesh gets to sleep with the women before they get married and what I got from that is . . . he, he is greedy, and he wants all the
women for himself for once. And he wasn’t, all the other men, like Enkidu weren’t happy about it. Because when Enkidu was going to marry the prostitute and he found out that Gilgamesh got to sleep with her before they got married he wasn’t happy about that. And I think Enkidu kind of showed Gilgamesh kinda what was right and kinda what was wrong. And then when Enkidu died, he kinda took all that in and played it out and then, stuff, yeah

C: When Enkidu died he was kinda determined to kill, uh, humbuba, and that’s what I got. Like he, this was before he, like this was on his journey, this is before he got to the woods and he was at the forest, and um, he was determined to kill the um humbuba guy and that’s the kind of person he is. Once, once his friend died he was.. just went crazy and tried to um fixate his mind on doing something else. Maybe that’s a way to get over the grief.

G: Revenge

C: Revenge, yeah, true

K: Oh, um, I’ll go. I had the one about how, um, he smashed the rock into a thousand pieces and um, I was saying that it might have taken him across and I think that he like just took out his anger and like there was no need to because he couldn’t have, well, um, never mind, someone else?

This excerpt suggests some differences in teachers’ and students’ behaviors, or moves, in those discussions Jamie favored and in the descriptions offered as traditional in other research studies. In this excerpt the teacher is invisible for six student turns making up a single episode. While many studies show that student contributions to class discussions of literature are limited to single-sentence answers, several of these students
extend and explain their own contributions, as indicated by sentence starters such as “From that I got” or “I guess,” or “I think” or “So, basically.” Students also take on what is often seen as the teacher’s turn, elaborating on what others have said (“I agree . . .”) adding details, and raising related issues (“Mine kind of fits here . . .”). Still, these findings warrant more questions and further research. Is Jamie aware of the generally short turns across these discussions? How does he interpret them? If he is interested in helping students develop their turns, what might he do to help students sustain longer conversational turns?

Next, we will look at the kinds of communication units that make up the teacher and students’ turns in order to develop Jamie’s ideas about teacher “prods” as well as to understand the kinds of moves that students are making in these discussions.

**Kinds of Communication Units.** Each communication unit was coded within one of four major categories: Direct (any remark intended to move others toward an action or shift their attention or the focus of the discussion), Inform (any statement of fact or opinion whose purpose is to represent what the speaker knows, believes, or thinks about a topic), Question (any verbal move that invites or requires a response from another participant), Respond (any verbal move that acknowledges, restates, evaluates, or otherwise reacts to preceding remarks). A fifth category, “other,” included all remarks that could not be coded within one of the other five categories. Table five summarizes the percentage of each kind of communication unit used by the teacher and students in each of the four favored discussions.

In looking at the language function of remarks in a number of classrooms, Marshall, Smagorinsky and Smith found that, in general, “teachers’ remarks ranged
widely across the four language functions while students' remarks were most frequently informative in purpose (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995, p. 39). In other words, while teachers directed activity, asked questions, responded to previous answers, and made informative remarks, students tended only to make informative remarks (answer the teacher's questions).

Table 5 Percentage of Communication Units Within Turns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N of Units</th>
<th>% Direct</th>
<th>% Inform</th>
<th>% Question</th>
<th>% Respond</th>
<th>% Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen in the table, there were, on average, strong differences in the proportion of statements made by teacher and students within each of the major categories, much in keeping with findings reported by Marshall, Smagorinsky and Smith (1995). Across three of the four discussions, 5% or fewer of students' statements were coded as directive in function (while in one discussion the number of student communication units coded as directive went as high as 10%, they were still significantly lower than the percentage of teacher's statements coded as directive), while in most cases
more than half of the teacher's were so coded. Meanwhile, in most of the discussions well over half of the students' remarks were coded as informative while the percentage of teacher's remarks coded informative stayed closer to 20%. In general (with one exception), the teacher in these discussions was more likely than the students to ask questions.

That exception, discussion number 1, in which students discuss the qualities of a hero, is worth examining because of that difference, but also because of Jamie's interest in it. Here is a passage from his interview in which he describes some of the things he likes about this discussion.

Once it gets going there's a lot of debate about the qualities of a hero, and the teacher doesn't have to do much, there's talk about vigilantes, can a hero be a vigilante, the qualities of Odysseus, but the exchanges in this one were fairly quick, but they were on topic and I liked that, even them asking each other some questions, and some debate, it sounded like they were into it . . . So, I just thought it was a lively exchange and there were, it wasn't the same kids dominating, either; that was the other thing about it.

Jamie makes note of at least two things going on in this discussion that seem important to him about the characteristics of the talking behavior; one is that the students seem to debate and the other is that they ask each other questions. An analysis of the transcript holds up that this conversation is different in the number of student generated questions. Furthermore, if by debate Jamie means that students listen to and respond to one another, the transcript analysis also holds up this analysis by Jamie, in that this transcript shows
far more examples of students responding directly to one another’s remarks than any other.

C: Okay. I got something. Okay, Do you think Odysseus is a hero? And if so, why?

B: Uh, I think he is because he had the uh, he risked his life to save others, and, uh, yup

Teacher: Okay, anybody else. Chris?

C: I think he is a hero because he fought in Troy and he killed all those bad guys, I guess, and (mumbling) he, and he screwed up the suitors and all that, I guess, even though that was pretty bad

B: He what?

C: Screwed up...

G: Well, I don’t think he was a hero for killing all those people and stuff, and taking the women and sharing them and stuff, and I don’t think he really did anything heroic, except get lost and stuff.

K: I said, “What are the qualities you look for in a hero? Like, what are the qualities people look for in a hero?

Teacher: K, I am going to have you hold that question for just a second, and I’m going to have you go next, but first, did anyone else what to talk about whether Odysseus was a hero or not?

G: Umm, I said that Odysseus is, umm, I don’t really think that he is a hero because he didn’t, like, the maid and the suitors, I think some of that was a little unacceptable because there was really no point in um, ripping off their manhoods
and feeding them to the dogs?

B: Hey, that’s mine!

G: And, so, yeah, I don’t think he is a hero because of that (muffled)

B: (whispers) I’m before you

Teacher: Michelle?

M: I agree. Because isn’t a hero supposed to be like all good-hearted and not like sadisitic and evil and stuff?

J: What about *The Punisher*?

B: Ah, haha, *The Punisher*.

G: *The Punisher?* Laughing (several voices comment)

B: That’s a good one

Teacher: Can you explain that to me, Joe, because I don’t know what that is.

J: He’s like a vigilante kind of hero-like person, because he is, like, the man-

B: He was-

J: He choked(?) people, but he did it for a good cause.

G; Yeah, But Odysseus didn’t have to kill all those people-

(The room erupts)

Several boys’ voices, yes, yes he did

N: Yes, he did because they weren’t trustworthy-

G: He didn’t have to kill the women. Not all heroes are um, all nice and stuff, some are mean, like Odysseus is, but he still didn’t need to kill all the women like he did.
C: I say that any person that is willing to give his life in battle or combat or whatever to me is a hero. I don't know to anyone else, but anyone who is willing to risk his life to save something...is-

G: So, like a murderer if he goes to war, he comes back he is a hero?

B: Duh, of course! (several boys voices in agreement) God.

C: Well, what? A murderer would probably get caught.

Teacher: Alex, you have been waiting patiently.

A: Um, I feel that he is a hero in some ways, like that he did risk his life in combat, but I don’t really approve of him trying, um, killing the maids and suitors, so I have sort of mixed emotions about it...

This excerpt represents a continuous flow of conversation in this discussion. In 32 turns, the teacher speaks four times, three of which are simply moves to make space for another voice in the conversation by pointing and naming a student who is trying to speak. One exchange involving the teacher (K: I said, what are the qualities you look for in a hero, like what are the qualities people look for in a hero? T: K, I am going to have you hold that question for just a second and I’m going to have you go next, but did anyone else want to talk about whether Odysseus was a hero or not?) happened after the second student answered C’s question. This exchange and its effect on the rest of the episode are worth looking at more closely. This exchange represents, I think, students’ internalization of the I-R-E pattern; once a question has been answered, it is time to move to the next question. However, once the teacher asked the student to hold the question, seven other students respond to C’s question, and each other's responses to the question, often heatedly, and sometimes with other questions. M., for instance, counters with the
question “Isn’t a hero supposed to be...?” Students’ responses to one another are often marked with language to let the previous speaker know his or her ideas are being taken up; for instance, “Well, I don’t think” or “I agree” or “Yeah, but.” The students “debate” and use of questions directed at one another do seem to support Jamie’s contention that this conversation is markedly different from typical schoolroom exchanges and from many of the other discussions that have taken place in his room.

Jamie has named characteristics of good classroom discussions that describe what the participants, both teacher and student, do in the discussion. Jamie’s instincts and knowledge about classroom discussion seem to be aligned with many researchers of classroom discourse, and several analyses of his favored transcripts seem to bear out his contention that these are “better than average” classroom discussions of literature in terms of who talks and what “moves” they make in the discussion. If, as I argued in chapter two, teachers are informed about this kind of thinking (about number and length of student turns) by teacher preparation and popular press texts for teachers, then this is not surprising. However, I also argued in that chapter that teachers have less access to research about the content of students’ talk. We look next, then, at Jamie’s language for describing what students have to say in classroom discussions.

**Characteristics of the Content of the Discussion**

**The Teacher Says.** Jamie’s analysis of the classroom discussions he reviews doesn’t stay at the level of conversational turns or participation; while he believes that students should talk to one another and be engaged in the conversation, this is a necessary but insufficient description of a successful classroom conversation. Jamie also concerns himself with the content of the conversation. Coding of this interview reveals
three main descriptors of the content of successful discussions: insight, connections and topicality.

**Insight.** The most salient term Jamie used to describe the successful contributions to classroom conversations was “insightful.” Coded 9 times in the transcript of the interview, this term was a little hard to pin down, and later in the interview I asked if he could explain it to me. He answered, “It might just be a moment where a kid stepped up without me prodding, and he maybe made a comparison...or...without, without something before that required them to answer in that way...” In describing a particular conversation he said, “But there are some insightful moments, when they talk about heroes trying to prove themselves, which is something that we never really talked about, it just sort of came out in the discussion.” Throughout the interview, he often used this term and followed it with examples in which students gave answers that surprised and delighted him. While he doesn’t say this is why these answers surprised him, it is often true that these are remarks that drew on multiple sources of knowledge.

**Connections.** In fact, making connections may be another way for Jamie to say what he means when he says “insight.” For instance, in describing his favorite classroom discussion he says, “there’s talk about vigilantes, can a hero be a vigilante...they started talking about Oprah and Doctor Phil, some kind of current things.” In discussing another conversation he says, “Look, here, they started talking about females, you know, heroines, and how that worked. They brought in *Star Wars.*” In discussing another transcript on the same topic he points out, “there were some good questions about fake heroes and real-life heroes which I thought brought it back again, like in the other one, brought it back to what THEY know, like modern-day heroes...” Even in conversations
that he found rife with problems, he recognized as shining moments those when students accessed more sources of knowledge than simply the text in front of them at the moment: "They talk about Enkidu and Gilgamesh without prodding, so they were switching between texts without the teacher having to say ‘Well, what about Enkidu, what about Gilgamesh?’"

**Staying on Topic.** While Jamie really values students’ insights and connections, he values them most when they grow from and are clearly related to the topic at hand. He says when describing one of the chosen discussions, “The exchanges in this one were fairly quick, but they were on topic and I liked that, even them asking each other some questions, and some debate, it sounded like they were into it.” Later, about the discussion he ranked fourth he says, “I don’t know whether to even include this one, you know, they just... I felt like sometimes they weren’t making any point, but just talking about themselves and their lives.” It seems then, that there is a delicate balance in Jamie’s desire for students to use their own sources of knowledge, but in a way that furthers or deepens their understanding of the text or the generalizations of the text. In other words, they must stay on topic, too.

**The Transcripts Say.** Marshall (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995) found that students rarely used multiple knowledge sources in classroom discussions of literature and Smith (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995) found that adults in book clubs were much more likely to use personal knowledge in their discussions than students in classrooms do. It is interesting that Jamie notes these moments as important ones in his students’ discussion, and also that he seems to struggle to find the language to describe these moments. As we saw in the literature review, while student participation (everyone
contributing, students asking questions, etc.) is often discussed in methods and popular teacher texts, there is less in these texts about how to recognize or name student learning.

Using Marshall’s coding scheme to look at the content of the discourse in these transcripts that Jamie favored gives us one means of sorting out the multiple ways students might make connections and have insight. It will also help us see how these terms are related to the idea of staying on topic. We will look at the informative statements and the questions that made up the discussion.

**Content of Informative Statements.** As explained earlier, to examine the kind of information that students and the teacher exchanged in classroom discussions, each informative remark was first coded for the focus of information: classroom logistics, reading or quoting from the text, or instructional focus. Those statements that were coded as instructional focus were further analyzed for knowledge sources and kinds of reasoning used.

Table 6 summarizes the kinds of knowledge that teachers and students drew upon when making informative statements about the issues they were discussing. Whereas Marshall (Marshall, Patterns of Discourse in classroom discussion of literature, 1989) only uses six categories of knowledge sources, I have added a seventh metacognitive knowledge. In this category I wanted to capture the informative statements that teacher and students used to help each other see how to participate successfully in a discussion or to discuss how they had read something. Some examples of teacher’s statements coded as pedagogical include the following: “So, as a participant in this discussion, you can make a statement, you can ask a question, you can answer somebody’s question, you can agree or disagree with them, you can use examples to extend your thinking” and “Now, the first
move is always the easiest, because all you have to do is say what you are thinking or ask a question” and “Okay, I am going to help Andy get us started by turning his statement into a question.”

Table 6 Knowledge Source for Informative Statements: Percentage of Units by Speaker

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N of units</th>
<th>% Personal</th>
<th>% Text</th>
<th>% Context</th>
<th>% General</th>
<th>% Prior Teaching</th>
<th>% Metacognitive</th>
<th>% other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>44</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>33</td>
<td>67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
<td>121</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6 may offer the clearest explanation of what this teacher really values in classroom discussions. While these discussions, like those on which Marshall, Smagorinsky and Smith (1995) report, show that both students and teachers draw most frequently on knowledge about the text in classroom discussions, Jamie’s students, in these discussions, also draw, to a much greater degree than one might expect, on other knowledge sources, including personal or autobiographical knowledge, general knowledge, and prior instruction. In explaining why he liked particular discussions, Jamie referred frequently to students’ ability to connect multiple texts or multiple information sources. Below are several short excerpts from discussion number 2, in which students are discussing the question of whether or not Odysseus is a hero. In doing so, as they wrestle with the criteria that they are using to answer the question, they return to several other texts they have encountered in their unit “What is a hero?” In excerpt one, W. and T. discuss the criteria of a hero. In excerpt two, Br. tries to move the discussion of these criteria forward, by reminding her classmates of the heroism of
Gilgamesh, a text the class had taken up earlier in the year, and some of her classmates turn the discussion to personal knowledge (what if it was your friend?). In the final excerpt, W. continues to push his classmates to define their terms and criteria by referencing *Star Wars* which the class had watched together at the beginning of the unit as an example of the hero’s quest.

**Excerpt one**

**W:** It’s not just the suitors. I mean, even if, even if, if he had saved, if he had saved his crew from the Cyclops instead of yelling at him and gotten his crew home safely then, he, he, he, would have been a hero. The suitors are beside the point. Whether he killed the suitors or not does not make him a hero.

**T:** Well, he’s still a hero because he’s the main guy in the book

**W:** That doesn’t make him a hero either.

**T:** Yeah, because in the end-

**W:** Just because he’s the main character does not make him a hero.

**Excerpt two**

**Br:** I think Gilgamesh was a good example of a hero because he umm was he got nicer and he actually did something unselfish and he tried to do something-

**B:** It doesn’t have anything to do with being a hero.

**B2:** I was actually going to disagree.

**G:** Can I tell you my idea?

**T:** Um, Brandi, go ahead and call on people who want to talk about your subject, or call on someone to introduce a new topic.
Br: Eric?

E: I disagree with that because he invaded Enkidu’s privacy when he died, brought him back, for all we know, he could have wanted to die.

B: Yesss! (several overlapping voices)

E: If he wanted to die, he probably would have tried to kill himself before that, Gilgamesh was just trying to be a good friend and get his friend back.

B: He still didn’t have to bring him back from the afterlife. Come on. There was no reason for that

G: Okay, if your best friend died, would you want him back?

Excerpt Three

W: Well, I just wanted to say that I think the only really good example we have of the heroes’ quest was the Star Wars.

(several voices) Yes!

W: Because he’s really the only, that’s really the only one-

B: That’s somewhat realistic-

W: Where you can see him trying to be a hero and trying to save a group of people from another bad group and he does it in a heroic way, like Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh is kinda, you know he wants (someone tries to interrupt him, Wilson shushes him). I mean people have friends die all the time and they don’t go through the extent to go on a journey, to try to bring them back I mean, you go and you mourn for a while and then you you don’t exactly forget about them, but you kinda go on, go on with your life you don’t go out and-
B: Kill people.

W: I don't think he killed people-

(several overlapping voices)

B: See, Enkidu and Gilgamesh try to prove a point by going out and killing a monster.

W: But that's more of a story about how someone, about a guy who changes, but it's, it's not really, I wouldn't call him a hero because he tried to bring his friend back.

Here we see that the students in this class have taken up the challenge to discuss whether or not Odysseus is a heroic figure, a challenge introduced by the first student speaker (not the teacher). In order to do so, they refer not only to the facts of the text itself, but to other texts and their own experiences.

Below is another excerpt that was particularly interesting to Jamie. In it, students ask one another about their preferred way of reading the texts, drawing on some work that we had done to introduce them to critical reading pedagogy. Jamie was particularly interested in the way that this language about reading gave the students a new way of talking. He says, "having more to talk about, like you have lenses, or you have more than one way of looking at something. Having more than one way to look at something, or more than one way to approach conflict, you know like I saw it differently, and they have a way to say it "as a feminist, I saw it this way," and "as a whatever" you know they have more to say than, 'well, that's not the way I saw it,' it's a much richer conversation."
B: Yeah, I had a question, which reading chart do you listen as-

Teacher: Which reading chart? Which reading lens?

B: Yeah, which reading lens.

Teacher: Do you want to answer that, question, or do you want to go back?

M: Yeah, I'll answer that... I think that the um, well my two, well the ones I use more are, well the feminist, because I'm a girl, and um, the reader response, because I think the reader response kind of makes you think more about what you are reading instead of just like reading it because you have to, you have to read it and kind of like pick it apart, so you know, that's what I think about the lenses, so-

C: I think, I thought that like the lenses were helpful, because like all the lenses gave you like a different point of view to, to uh reading the story. They all like gave you different parts to pick out of the story, so-

G: I think I agree with Courtney because the two most that I ever used for like everything were reader response and like the feminist one, because they both seemed to like encourage me the most when I read because girls don’t’ like have a bigger role and so (lost)-

Mi: Um, I think that it was easier when I didn’t like use the lenses things, because I didn’t like them, they made it all confusing.

W: (lost)

C: Wait, what did you say?

Mi: That it is easier to not use the lenses.

C: Oh, okay
Teacher: Ryan

R: To me, the reader response thing was the most helpful because like Courtney said, I was able to like to understand it more. When I was readin’ and thinkin’ of stuff, and writin’ down stuff I kinda thought about it, and I understood what it was saying more and it helped me, more than any of the other ones.

Teacher: Heaven?

H: I agree with Miranda, like why do we have to read with these lenses at all, like, I don’t like to like read and stop, I like to just like let it be-

W: The lenses like just slow you down.

In this excerpt of seventeen turns, the teacher speaks four times. First taking up the first student’s question and clarifying it, he then asks the class if they want to take up this question now or wait. After that, the teacher’s only interjections are to invite new voices to participate. The students themselves discuss how they read and interacted with the text and why. Here they use metacognitive language to stake their claims about the best way to read.

As a complicating case, we should turn our attention to discussion number four. Were we to believe that one could simply choose the most important quality of classroom discussion, count the number of times that quality occurred, and rank the discussions based on the quantitative analysis of it, we might be led to believe that the discussion ranked number 4 should appear higher on this list. Yet, Jamie ranks this discussion a low fourth, and indeed, wondered whether to include it in his favorites at all. While similar to his first and second choices in that students draw on a range of knowledge sources to discuss the question, this discussion also is notable in that it has the lowest percentage of
informative statements about the text itself; it lacks that other quality Jamie admires: staying on topic. It may be then that drawing on a wide range of knowledge in the discussions of literature has a limited return. Perhaps if those statements aren’t linked back to the work at hand, they become, as Jamie described this discussion, “almost too general… I felt like sometimes they weren’t making any point, but just talking about themselves and their lives.”

Kinds of Reasoning of Informative Statements. Jamie’s term “insight” in his discussion of the content of classroom conversations may refer, in part, as discussed above, to the kinds of knowledge that students bring to bear in their discussions of literature. However, besides looking at the kinds of knowledge that teacher and students access during their discussions of literature, Marshall’s coding scheme further codes conversations to ask what kinds of reasoning were employed in making informative statements (Marshall, Patterns of Discourse in classroom discussion of literature, 1989). Jamie did also describe “insight” in ways that might lead us to think about a number of kinds of reasoning students might do. For instance, when Jamie says, “They also have insightful things to say . . . again Odysseus comes up, was he a hero, or not a hero,” his example seems to suggest that he values students moving from summarizing or even interpreting the text to evaluating the characters. When he says, “They got at the essence . . . does it matter if a hero does . . .” or again when he says, “they got into that . . . they were talking about the concept of selfishness,” he seems to value students’ ability to move beyond the text to make generalizations. Therefore, I further coded participants’ instructional remarks to try to represent the kinds of reasoning employed in these discussions.
The data for the teacher and his students are summarized in Table 7. In keeping with the findings reported in Marshall, Smagorinsky and Smith (1995) the teacher was more likely to describe or summarize while students were more likely to interpret. Neither group was as likely to evaluate or generalize. Once again, the two conversations in which students did evaluate or generalize with some frequency are worth noting as it seems that these moves captured the teacher’s attention. Conversation number one, in which students discuss what makes a good hero, contains the highest percentage of generalizing statements (22%). These statements reflect students’ attempts to wrestle with the concept of heroism. In order to answer the question of whether or not Odysseus is a hero, students must move beyond interpreting the text and make generalizations about what the term hero means and what criteria they are using to make a judgment about the character in the text. In truth, many of these generalizations are unsophisticated, yet making generalizations allows and even requires students to bring to bear a wider range of knowledge sources (personal and general) than interpretive statements allow or require. One might read these somewhat unsophisticated generalizations, then, as a more sophisticated interpretive move than a more sophisticated interpretation of a text made by a student in answer to a teacher-generated interpretive frame.

In discussions one and four, students make a noticeably larger percentage of evaluative statements (13% and 15% respectively). These are noticeable in that they occur in different kinds of situations, both perhaps worth noting. In discussion one, students’ evaluative statements reference their way of reading, rather than their evaluation of a particular text. Their evaluative statements are all made concerning their experience of reading “through critical lenses.”
In discussion four the students' evaluative comments are concerned with the overall range of texts in the entire unit entitled “What makes a good relationship?” Here they make evaluative statements concerning the range of texts read and the texts or activities they would like to have done as part of the unit. Interestingly, Jamie’s evaluation of these two discussions point to the complicated nature of judging the success or failure of classroom discussions. While he really values the evaluative remakes students offer about their reading experiences, saying that the students interacted with the texts in meaningful ways, he is dissatisfied with discussion number four because he feels this discussion is too rooted in their extant experiences and opinions. Therefore, while Marshall, Smagorinsky and Smith (1995) seem to value instructional conversations that allow students to use a range of kinds of reasoning, a look at Jamie’s discussions might lead us to see this as a more complex task than it first appears. While teenagers might feel free to evaluate everything (any high school teacher ever to have entered a classroom with a new tie or haircut cannot deny this), teachers may want to think carefully about what sorts of discussions push students to use a range of knowledge sources to make informed generalization or evaluations, or to build new ideas, rather than simply state their currently held beliefs.

Table 7 Kinds of Reasoning for Informative Statements: Percentage of Units by Speaker

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N of</th>
<th>% Summary</th>
<th>% Interpretation</th>
<th>% &amp; Evaluation</th>
<th>% Generalization</th>
<th>% Other</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>&gt;1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Knowledge Source of Questions. As with informative statements, questions asked by participants during discussions were first coded for focus: classroom logistics or instruction. Those questions coded as instructional were further analyzed for sources of knowledge and kinds of reasoning elicited. Tables 8 and 9 summarize these findings.

Table 8 Knowledge Source for Questions: Percentage of Units by Speaker

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N of units</th>
<th>% Personal</th>
<th>% Text</th>
<th>% Context</th>
<th>% General</th>
<th>% Metacognition</th>
<th>% other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As table 8 suggests, both teachers and students were generally more likely to ask questions that drew upon knowledge about the text(s) under study than other knowledge sources; this is in keeping with findings reported in Marshall, Smagorinsky and Smith (1995). However, with the exception of discussion three, which seems typical in this respect of traditional classroom discussions, analysis of the other three discussions yields interesting data that can help us understand more clearly why they were chosen as representative cases.

First, discussions one and two, especially discussion one, stand out simply because of the numbers of questions asked by students. The question can be seen as the “power move” in discussion, in that it drives the direction of the talk, and in typical classroom conversations, it is a move relegated to the teacher. In discussion one, students...
asked six times as many questions as the teacher, controlling, it can be argued, the
direction of the conversation.

Next, we might note in discussion number one the way that students build out
from the text-based question about whether Odysseus is a hero by adding general and
personal questions about the qualities of heroes, including questions such as “Who do
you look up to? What are the qualities of a hero? Is there a difference between ‘fake’
heroes and ‘real’ heroes?” Students begin at the text, but bring their own home
knowledges to bear.

Finally (as noted in the previous section about instructional statements), the
transcripts show us how students directed the discussion from the text under study to the
way in which they had read those texts. In order to account for these questions which I
believe have an instructional focus but are not content-directed, I have added another
kind of knowledge to the analytic code developed by Jim Marshall, which I have called
here “metacognition.” Not only are these questions unique in the kinds of knowledge
they draw upon, but I will argue in the next section, they are unique in the kinds of
reasoning students ask each other to use.

**Kinds of Reasoning in Questions.** In *The Language of Interpretation* Marshall,
Smagorinsky and Smith (1995) report that the kinds of reasoning elicited by participants
were largely summary / description or interpretation, indeed that these two categories
taken together represented 80% of the kinds of questions asked (p. 46). While discussion
three reported on here follows that pattern, discussions one, two and four are notably
different, and actually, each is uniquely different from the others. It may be that the types
of questions asked in these discussions are largely responsible for the ways in which they stood out as different from, and better than, the others that Jamie evaluated.

Table 9 Kinds of Reasoning for Questions: Percentage of Units by Speaker

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N of units</th>
<th>% Summary</th>
<th>% Interpretation</th>
<th>% Evaluation</th>
<th>% General</th>
<th>% Metacognitive</th>
<th>other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>T 3</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S 18</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>T 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S 7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>T 10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S 3</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>T 19</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S 4</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In discussions one and two, students direct the conversation by taking over the role of questioner. In these discussions the teacher has delegated this role to students by telling them (quoted from discussion one), “The first move is always the easiest because all you have to do is say what you are thinking or ask a question, so someone who thinks that participating in a discussion is really hard might want the first move.” In discussion number two, the opening gambit really steps beyond interpretation to ask for an evaluation: “Is The Odyssey a good example of the heroes’ quest?” In a back-and-forth exchange on this topic, students ask each other to define their terms (“If he’s a hero, can you just choose anyone to be a hero? If I say Gumby is my hero, can he just be my hero?”), to put themselves in the shoes of the characters (“If he were to just go back home and do absolutely nothing and just let everyone kill him, and, like, eat his guts, would you rather that happened to him than getting revenge on people?”), and to make comparisons (“Do you guys think there are any differences between fake heroes and real-life heroes?”).
Discussion

A combined look at one teacher's qualitative description of good classroom discussion and a quantitative analysis of four telling cases of that teacher's work reveal a number of interesting ideas about good classroom discussions. Perhaps what is most important for practicing teachers is the range of qualities that can be counted as qualities of good discussion, and how those qualities intersect, overlap, and affect one another. The look across these telling cases shows that a discussion that is strong along one dimension, such as number of student turns, might be weaker along another, such as kinds of reasoning employed. The combined analyses also suggest that the easiest qualities to measure (number of student turns, length of turn) might not be the most important. While Jamie at times struggled to describe the criteria he used to evaluate the
discussion he ranked as number one, he was certain it was the best. While it was not the best in ratio of teacher-to-student turns, the quantitative analysis of the content of students’ questions and remarks and of the kinds of reasoning students employed reveal ways that the discussion certainly was different in significant ways from the others. Working with the teacher in this two-tiered way reveals the complexities of classroom discussions as a pedagogical tool and provides the teacher new language for expressing his insight into the work in the classroom.

What Did the Teacher Do to Plan for and Implement Successful Classroom Discussions of Literature?

Finally, we will return to an analysis of Jamie’s work by looking at his interview and the transcripts of the discussions in order to see what things he did that seemed to foster those qualities of classroom discussion that he valued. Not surprisingly, given both the review of literature and Jamie’s descriptions of good classroom discussions, he was most likely to see and name specific behaviors that the teacher might enact during the classroom discussion as actions he could take to improve classroom discussions, and less likely to see or name those things that had to do with altering the content of the discussion. For instance, he names wait time, controlling students’ turn-taking, giving sincere praise and summarizing, but doesn’t say much about his ability to think about or control the content of the discussion, even when the transcripts actually offer a window into some of the things that I argue he did do to increase the success of the discussions.

Interestingly, many of the moves Jamie makes, inside and outside of the discussions, affect many of the attributes of the discussion; untangling cause and effect relationships in a pedagogical situation that is so complex is complicated and inexact.
Still, I believe that arguments can be made about Jamie’s work and its positive outcomes on the discussions in his classroom.

**Fluency**

What seemed most important in promoting the kind of fluency that Jamie values is the work he did outside of the discussion. His use of inquiry and essential questions and subquestions, which provided larger conceptual frames for the discussions made the discussions in service of and of value to the inquiry and part of the growing conceptual and procedural understandings that were related to the inquiry.

*The Teacher Says.* We will remember that Jamie talked a great deal about what he felt he did that impeded fluency. He told us fluency was negatively impacted when he “was in there too much” and he “prodded” the discussion.

*The Transcripts Say.* Indeed, if we compare discussions one and two with discussions three and four, we can see evidence that in his very best discussions, one of the things he did was just to get out of the way. I would argue that he was enabled to do this at least in part because the students were engaged in an ongoing inquiry that they understood and that engaged them. This ongoing project meant that discussions were in fact part of a larger ongoing conversation that had already been framed and did not necessarily need to be framed or prodded in individual discussions.

Discussions one and two, we will remember, have the highest ratios of student-to-teacher turns (5:1 and 9:1, respectively). In these discussions, students also ask more questions than the teacher does. As another way of trying to understand when a question becomes a prod, I returned to the transcripts to look at the teacher turns, and see whether Jamie repeated his questions (a sign that the question hasn’t been taken up by the
students). While there are no examples of the teacher repeating a question in discussions one and two, in discussion three and four, there are four incidents each of repeated questions as in “What's it say about him as a man? What kind of man's Gilgamesh? How's it answer your question?” Another noticeable characteristic of discussion number three (the infamously prodded discussion) is Jamie's making note that “everyone has to speak,” a directive that he repeats seven times in the course of this discussion. A directive that is seemingly unnecessary in discussions one and two.

While I begin here, with the idea of the teacher “staying out of the way” as a way to promote fluency of discussions, I by no means endorse this as a plan by itself. Jamie did many other things that allowed him, in the very best discussions, to get out of the way and allow students to take the reins.

**Participation**

*Teaching the Skills of Discussion.* The literature review offered suggestions to teachers for teaching the skills of discussion, specifically naming the following skills: asking questions, listening, answering, following up, referring to the text, soliciting others’ opinions and ideas. All of these are of obvious importance to fostering participation. Jamie mentions teaching strategies that fall into this category, and a review of the transcripts reveals with more depth evidence of this strategy at work.

*The Teacher Says.* In Jamie’s response to the question, what can teachers do to promote successful classroom discussions, he names “controlling turns” and “self-assessment.” Both of these seem to begin to get after some of the things that researchers suggest when they talk about teaching the skills of discussion. But how does the teacher
"control turns" and do so in a way that teaches students how to successfully enact discussions? And if they are going to self-assess what are the criteria?

**The Transcripts Say.** Two of the four discussions chosen by Jamie as the best of the twelve he reviewed were discussions organized by the three-notecard technique (Wilhelm, Baker, & Dube-Hackett, 2001). In these discussions, each student was given three notecards and told to throw one in each time they spoke. They were also told that they would give themselves a grade for participation, with the best marks going to those students who neither exceeded nor went below the three turns represented by the notecards. This strategy is used, as Jamie says, to "control turns" or to help students who fail to participate by serving as a reminder to them that they should take a turn, and students who tend to dominate, by reminding them that they should listen and choose their contributions carefully.

In these same discussions, students were also asked to prepare for the discussions by writing something they would like to say about the text being discussed on the back of each card and told that they might write "a question, a comment, or an interesting fact." In these same discussions, directions at the beginning of the discussion laid out for students what sort of "moves" were open to them as participants in a discussion: "You can make a statement, you can ask a question, you can answer someone’s question, you can agree or disagree with them, or you can offer examples to extend your thinking."

While telling isn’t, by itself, teaching, this move on the teacher’s part should be considered an attempt to teach students the various "moves" a full participant in a discussion uses.
In the discussion that Jamie ranks as third, "What kind of man is Gilgamesh?" he scaffolds students' practice of referring to the text by giving each student a passage from the text and asking them to explain how this passage helps to build an answer to the question he is posing. In the discussion with the greatest length of student turns (as measured in communication units), each participant does refer directly to the text, by quoting or summarizing the passage that she has been given. One could argue that the strategy has been successful. And yet, as Jamie points out, this discussion has a hard time getting off the ground. We will look at this strategy for preparing for discussions when we take up engagement. For now, we might simply say that this strategy seems to have been a double-edged sword and point to the way that increasing one kind of success in a classroom discussion can negatively impact another aspect of the discussion.

**Uptake.** According to Marshall, Smagorinsky and Smith (1995) and Nystrand (1996), uptake involves restating a student's response or turning it into a question to prompt further elaboration. Uptake seems certain to increase participation by increasing students' belief that their contributions matter, are heard, and indeed affect the direction of the discussion. Uptake is also a hallmark of substantive engagement (to be taken up in the next section) with the topic of discussion and with other participants. Uptake, however, works against traditional classroom routines because it requires that the teacher withhold evaluative comments that would short circuit the discussion and refrain from being the sole mediator of discussion.

**The Teacher Says.** Jamie seems to be grappling with the tension between wanting to give praise and recognizing that in some ways that praise, or any evaluative comment, carries with it the ability to shut down conversation. In the section of his
interview in which he discusses his role as a facilitator he says the following: “Praise, giving sincere praise and recognizing that might not even be picked up in the audio, but it might just be the way you respond the way you look [at a student], just your general conduct as a facilitator. That’s the other thing. I don’t want it to be, ‘good, I got the answer that the teacher wanted’ I don’t want it to be that, that scenario, but I want everyone to be comfortable saying, ‘Hey, that was smart, that was insightful, that reminds me of...’ so, um...” Jamie not only wants participation and substantive engagement; he recognizes that student uptake is essential to it.

Jamie’s talk around response to students in discussion, while tentative and ending in the classic statement of unresolvedness (“so, um....”), can be unpacked to reveal that he does know several things. One is that praise can lead students to believe that this discussion is simply a game of “guess what the teacher knows (or wants).” Another is that many teacher moves that could be seen as uptake simply could not be recorded on audiotape, a nod of recognition, eye contact, a raised eyebrow, a shrug of the shoulder, all of which might signal to a speaker, “I heard you, that’s interesting, hmmmm.... What do other people think?” Such moves are empowering and supportive of students, without usurping their interpretive authority or requiring that the teacher verbally endorse, repeat or rephrase student insights. These moves likewise encourage students to listen to each other, since the contributions themselves are not mediated by the teacher. And finally, that the art of practicing uptake should ultimately lead to students practicing explicit forms it themselves, using each other’s ideas to achieve shared insights around a project of inquiring together. So how does a teacher accomplish all of that?
**The Transcripts Say.** When remarks were coded as “response” they were also coded with the nature of that response. Possible codings in this category include acknowledgement (simple indication that a remark was heard), restatement (an effort to repeat a previous remark), positive evaluation (a positive comment on a previous remark), negative evaluation (a negative comment on a previous remark), request for explanation, elaboration, clarification (any remark that asks a previous speaker to speak more clearly or at greater length), or elaboration (any remark that moves beyond restatement by substantively changing the first speaker’s language or by offering an interpretation of what the speaker is saying. It strikes me that all such responses require substantive engagement with other participants and with their ideas.

Table 10 offers a look across the four “telling case” transcripts to help us better see how Jamie and his students responded to one another in discussions and to understand what the effect of different kinds of responses have on the engagement in a discussion.

Table 10 Kinds of Responses: Percentage of Units by Speaker

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N of units</th>
<th>% ACK</th>
<th>% RESTATE</th>
<th>% Pos. Eval</th>
<th>% Neg Eval</th>
<th>% Request for elab</th>
<th>% Elab</th>
<th>% Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>T 9</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S 83</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td>T 9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>56</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S 99</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3</td>
<td>T 9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S 37</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4</td>
<td>T 37</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S 58</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once again, the discussions that Jamie chose as the best stand out as remarkably different from others and from those reported in Marshall, Smagorinsky, and Smith (1995). In looking at teacher’s and students’ responses to each other in Jamie’s two
favorite discussions, students take responsibility for responding to comments on the floor almost ten times as often as the teacher does.

It is interesting to note that across all four discussions the teacher makes very few evaluative comments – positive or negative. While the teacher’s responses are used to acknowledge or restate a comment, or make a request for elaboration, the students participate in a range of responses. In fact, student responses are fairly evenly distributed across the range of types of responses recorded. In the traditional pattern of talk in classrooms, a teacher initiates the discussion, a student responds to the initiated topic, and the teacher evaluates that response, so that the teacher evaluation often serves as a signal to students that a topic is completed. Yet student evaluative comments, both positive and negative, rather than shutting down a conversation, seem to lead more often to the remarks being taken up for further discussion. This seems to be true in these conversations, where a response leads to dialogue, often to a kind of debate, and this leads to elaboration and rethinking. Such participation is one sign of substantive engagement.

Engagement

Time to Think. Common sense notions of engagement hold that people are immersed enthusiastically and over time in something that requires and rewards their attention. Time is certainly both a prerequisite and a criterion of engagement. In the literature review, we see three kinds of “time to think,” the kind, often called “wait time” that is allotted to students during a question, time that can be seen after asking a question (not calling on a single student immediately before or after a question has been posed so that responsibility for thinking about the question falls on all students), after a student has
been called upon (so that she can do her best thinking before speaking) and after a student has answered a question (so that others might think about the validity of the response and their response to it, so that students as well as the teacher can practice uptake) (Dillon, 1988; Wilhelm, 2007).

The other kind of time to think mentioned in the literature review is the time to think and prepare before a discussion begins, which I explored in the last section on participation and will expand on here. Baker (Wilhelm, Baker, & Dube-Hackett, 2001) and Johannesen and Kahn (2005) both suggest techniques for having students gather their thoughts before being asked to join a discussion of literature. As will be suggested by an analysis of the discussions, this idea may be more complicated than clear and worth further research.

*The Teacher Says.* Jamie names “wait time” as a technique that teachers should employ in a discussion of literature. He says, “like you’d have wait time, where a silence might be just, it will come, they will say something if you wait, instead of just thinking well, it’s been quiet 10 seconds, or 5 seconds, without, you know, having to redirect. So being comfortable with that is important, I think.”

Interestingly, while Jamie carefully constructed prediscussion activities for all of the discussions he hosted in this semester, he does not see or mention these assignments as part of the success or failure of any of them, and yet, I think, the transcripts would suggest that different prediscussion assignments lead to different discussion results.

*The Transcripts Say.* Table 11 helps us to compare the pre-discussion assignments for each of the four best discussions of literature.
Table 11 Prediscussion Assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussion</th>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Alone/pairs/groups</th>
<th>Directions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is a hero? (period 3 and 5)</td>
<td>Students were given a worksheet (Appendix C) and asked to answer a number of questions</td>
<td>First alone, and then in a group</td>
<td>Please answer the following questions about your reading, you will be given 10 minutes alone, and then 10 minutes to discuss what you wrote with a group, your discussion with your group will help you decide what you’d most like to talk with the whole class about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What kind of man is Gilgamesh?</td>
<td>Given a quote from the text, be prepared to explain its context and how it helps to answer the question “What kind of man is Gilgamesh”</td>
<td>Alone</td>
<td>You will have 10 minutes to review this quote to prepare for the discussion. You need to know what scene it is from, who is talking, to whom, and what it tells us about what kind of man Gilgamesh is?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What makes a good relationship?</td>
<td>Students were given a worksheet (appendix D) and asked to answer a number of questions</td>
<td>In groups</td>
<td>We will use these questions to review our understanding of the question “what makes a good relationship” based on the works that we read in this unit.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One thing that is really interesting about these assignments is that they clearly yield different positive and negative results in the enactment of both participation and engagement in the class discussion. The Gilgamesh assignment yielded what Jamie considered one of the “less good” good discussions. There were many things he did not like about this discussion, including that he is “in there too much, almost as much as the students” (which could be interpreted as ‘less engagement’) and yet he appreciates that the students are “on topic” and that they “refer to the book.” Perhaps we could argue that
students in this discussion are doing what is required conceptually and procedurally, but
without what Nystrand (Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1996) call
"substantive engagement" in the discussion. In this discussion 100% of students’
remarks are text-based. Their reasoning, as the task would suggest it would be, is 31%
summarizing and 69% interpretation. There is no evidence of students making
connections or using personal resources. If teachers are concerned about helping students
to summarize and interpret, or to refer to the text in discussion, this assignment seems
well designed. However, one could argue that while this may be a worthy instructional
goal, that classroom discussion is not the correct vehicle for students to develop and
display such knowledge. Looking at this discussion raises the question for me: What
curricular goals do classroom discussions address (and when should teachers do
something else)?

Like some of the discussions analyzed by Connolly and Smith (Connolly &
Smith, 2002), this Gilgamesh discussion has a stilted feel, both in the way students talk to
one another and the way they phrase their turns. This discussion yields the lowest
percentage of student responses to one another (16% as compared to 28% or higher in
each of the other three discussions), and the language used in student turns suggests a
reporting out rather than substantive engagement in developing a new idea or deepening
their understanding around the question. Many turns begin with the phrase "In the one I
had . . ." or "My passage is about . . ." instead of more substantive and personally
engaged comments that might begin, as contributions in the other transcripts do, with "I
would like to disagree with . . ." or "I would add that . . ."
In fact, at the beginning of the Gilgamesh discussion one student suggests that they simply, “like, go around in a circle” and a second student concurs, “Yeah, I want to see that, go around the circle, it will be a lot easier . . .” This suggestion, an example of what Nystrand et al. (Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1996) call procedural (not substantive) engagement, is picked up and tried for five turns before the teacher interrupts and suggests they should listen to each speaker and decide if they want to respond to one another, and if their passage is a sensible next one to discuss. In the passage below, Jamie finally interjects.

Teacher: Stop. Uhmmm, this is too artificial for me, okay. I think what we need to do, this is a discussion, not a, a, rotation, so people need to go where it feels natural, and, um... I’m hoping that people would comment on each other’s comments... agree, disagree, add to, you know, we are not going to-

C: Other people should know, like, when someone says a passage somebody else who has like the one that’s right after that-

Teacher: Natural places, like, when, when you talk to your friends you don’t sit in a circle and all take turns going around the circle, so, so we’re gonna, so, no, all very insightful comments, for sure, not to say that they’re not, but, but I’d like to, to leave off with Michelle, and then where it seems natural, where you’d be listening, I’m not going to force this, but see, I’m just not comfortable with going around the circle, it doesn’t seem natural to me, all right, let’s try it again, and, um, we will go, we’ll start with Joe, all right?
Here we see Jamie trying to encourage the contributions to be dialogic bids for substantive engagement instead of the schoolish “let’s just get it done” example of procedural engagement that it seems to have become. However, the assigned topic and the preparation for discussion seem to stand in his way.

On the other hand, the assignment that prepared students for the “What is a hero?” discussion asked them to substantively engage by reflecting on the work in four ways: on their understanding of the text, their understanding of other texts, their understanding of how they had read, and what questions all of this work raised. Furthermore, students were asked first to discuss their thinking with a smaller group and to prepare “one question that you think is worth pursuing with more people.” The large-group discussion that followed this preparation then began with a student-generated question that presumably students believed to be “worth pursuing with more people.” These two discussions, Jamie’s favorites, include the highest number of student responses to one another, the highest percentage of questions in student communication units, and the widest range of knowledge sources for informative statements.

While I will discuss these characteristics of discussions in looking at other things that Jamie did to support these successful discussions, I would say here that it seems simply giving students time to think before the discussion is an insufficient description of what students need to perform well in discussions. Rather, these examples would suggest that students not only need time to think, but that they need open-ended questions to think about. Edgier questions that are less tied to a text (Is Gilgamesh a hero?) and more open to connecting the self, world and text (What is a hero?) work better as the question frames and therefore allow or constrain certain kinds of contributions. Students may also
need to be instructed that the purpose of their thinking is not to answer, but to contribute perspectives and raise questions.

Students need the time to think and a sufficiently interesting reason for doing such thinking. They need questions and problem-orientations that capture them, either by allowing them to draw on their own knowledge sources (personal and general) or piquing their interest in some way. In such situations, engagement can lead to honest and authentic debate. Debate always requires substantive engagement.

Debate

Framing the Unit as Inquiry. Debate is tacitly encouraged by Jamie through the use of inquiry to frame his units. The use of devices and communal activities such as the hero chart to promote a visible sign of the current status of their thinking about a larger debate associated with the inquiry: e.g. What actually is a hero?

The Transcripts Say. The excerpts below provide examples of the ways that students used their responses to one another to debate big ideas in ways that help them to collaborate in negotiating, examining and building up that idea. In their responses they debate, disagree, consider and examine other perspectives, build on and use each other’s ideas to fuel further thought – clear examples of substantive engagement.

E: Yeah, now that we’ve read these stories that we’ve read, are there any worries that (muffled)
Teacher: So, Emily is sort of extending the question that is already on the floor, so did everyone hear her question?
C: No, not really.
Teacher: Now that we’ve read what we’ve read, is there anything that we’d take off of our list from our hero chart, or add to our hero chart? Joel?
J: Heroes have to have x-ray vision, and fly and breathe underwater, and stuff.
C: Superheroes.
B1: Heroes can be like Oprah.
B2; Or Doctor Phil.
B1: No, he’s just-
B3: Dr. Phil is going to get shot.
(laughter)
B1: Or perhaps Dr. Phil will get. . .well, what I’m saying is like, like a hero today
might be like someone who donates money for a good cause, like to help other
people.

In this episode, eight students work to answer the question “Have you revised your
thinking about what are the qualities of a hero?” It is noteworthy that Jamie uses another
teaching tool – a chart that the students contribute to and revise over time – to lend
coherence to the whole unit and a clear focus and purpose to unite readings and
discussions. This technique also keeps in the foreground the communal project the class
as a whole is engaged in -- on the unit and lesson or discussion level.

Here Joel answers Emily’s question with an answer that Cassie does not like. She
responds negatively by saying, “Superheroes” in a sardonic tone, suggesting that the
class should entertain a wider or different set of “heroes.” Her negative evaluation of
Joel’s answers leads a boy to respond by saying that “Heroes can be like Oprah.” The
next boy agrees and elaborates with the answer “Or Doctor Phil.” The supporter of
Oprah doesn’t think that Dr. Phil falls into the same category, and begins to respond
negatively “No, he’s just” and another boy picks up this idea, elaborating, “Dr. Phil is
going to get shot.” The supporter of Oprah (not Doctor Phil) as a modern day hero then
elaborates on his understanding of the difference between the two: “A hero today might
be like someone who donates money for a good cause, like to help other people.” This
student is engaged in debate because he posits a criterion of heroism (selflessly acting on others’ behalf) that he contends Dr. Phil does not share.

Also noteworthy, and to be explored more fully later, is that the engagement is fueled by students making connections to their personal knowledge of popular culture and by using their understandings both from the unit and from their lives – often in debate with other students’ perspectives- to negotiate even deeper and more communal understandings.

Teacher: Okay, so what piece of writing challenged your idea of what makes a good relationship? Tanisha?

Ta: It wasn’t the writing I don’t think, but um, Romeo and Juliet, it differed from what I thought, because, um, like, they loved each other more than they loved themselves, which I guess is love, but you are supposed to love yourself before you can love anybody else.

Teacher: So what are you trying to say?

Ty: What if you hate yourselves?

Ta: That they loved each other more than they loved themselves, and like since they both died, and I bet you, if they were both separate, and Romeo wouldn’t want Juliet to kill herself, and Juliet wouldn’t want Romeo to kill himself, but since they loved each other so much if they couldn’t have each other, they wanted to die, but you should love yourself more than you love anybody else.

Teacher: So, Romeo and Juliet then challenged you to kind of think about that?

Ty: So, you’re saying-

Ta: Yeah, I think they loved each other too much.
Ty: So, you're saying... Wait, I had it, so you are saying that you would rather live and, say that Juliet died and Romeo lived, would you rather live with the... knowing that someone you loved died?

Ta: I bet Romeo wouldn't want Juliet to kill herself.

Ty: Yeah, but she killed her... well, technically, she killed herself.

Ta: Yeah, well, if Romeo never killed himself, and Juliet did kill herself, Romeo wouldn't probably wanted her to done that, do that

TY: Yeah, but would he still, I think he would still kill himself, knowing, he would have guilt,she killed herself because she couldn't be with him.

Ta: Yeah, but if you just think, what they want for me?

Ty: Love, love, love, love. They loved each other so they killed themselves.

Ta: Yeah, but they wouldn't want each other to do that.

In this excerpt Ty, who is first seen making remarks that do not move the conversation forward ("what if you hate yourselves"), gets drawn into Tanisha's argument, and almost in spite of himself, begins to formulate his disagreement with her point. As he works to formulate the disagreement, his tentative clauses spur her to try to more clearly articulate her thinking. Here, Ty's opposition spurs Tanisha to elaborate on her own thinking more than she might have done without him.

**Student Insight**

Jamie encourages the articulation of student insights by the inquiry frame of the unit and discussion. The prediscussion preparations also promote the notion that students have something to contribute and this something is tied up in their personal insights and how they might promote shared insights. An aspect of inquiry that Jamie
uses in various ways to promote student insight is the use of authentic questions that are open-ended, debatable, and that require student contributions to address.

**Authentic Questions.** Nystrand and his colleagues (Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1996) define authentic questions as questions in which no single, right answer is expected and contrast these kinds of questions with “already-know-the-answer” test questions. Christoph and Nystrand (2001) developed a coding system that helps to categorize kinds of inauthentic questions. They offer four categories: recitation questions, reminder questions, implied answer questions, and guided prediction questions. They also note linguistic clues that let students know that a question is authentic: It feels tentative and is marked by self-corrections, it is conversational, and it asks more than one student to respond.

Another thing that may mark a question as authentic or inauthentic is the speaker. A parent’s question “Why did you do that?” may be interpreted as judgmental (you should not have done that!), while a friend asking the same question might be interpreted as curious (I’m just wondering). In much the same way a teacher who asks “What qualities make a hero?” might be judged to be fishing for a preconceived answer while a fellow student who asks the same question is judged to be interested in whether your ideas match up with his.

**The Teacher Says.** In the discussions Jamie liked least, he asked most of the questions, and the questions feel less authentic. In discussion three, while he asks it many times, Jamie seems to simply repeat a single question: What kind of man is Gilgamesh? (What kind of man is Gilgamesh based on that? What does it say about Gilgamesh?). While not using the term authentic, it is clear in his discussion of this transcript, that there
is something wrong with this question, or in the way he uses it to direct the discussion. He says, “The weakness, too, is that I say that I am not going to force this, it is just going to unfold, but then I end up forcing it, ha, I say that I am not going to force it, but at the same time, in the process, I end up forcing it.” Beyond this comment, Jamie says little about the quality or type of questions that he asks or initiates, nor does he discuss the kind of questions students ask.

**The Transcripts Say.** Comparing transcripts ranked one and two to those ranked three and four offers some insight into what makes a question seem “authentic.” In Jamie’s favorite discussions, (though framed implicitly by the larger inquiry question), the local-level questions during the discussion are asked by the students rather than the teacher. Some of the questions that led to the most responses from students also contained some of the linguistic markers mentioned by Christoph and Nystrand (2001): “Do you think Odysseus is a hero?” is more conversationally framed than “What evidence from the text suggest that Odysseus is, or is not, a hero?” The “you think” may also signal that the question is open to the whole class and contains room for more than one answer. Similarly, “What reading lens do you use as you read?” feels open to the class at large, and conversational, as it asks each reader about his or her own experience and opinion, and no one can answer incorrectly.

In contrast, in the discussions Jamie liked less, he asked most of the questions, and the questions feel less authentic. In discussion three, while he asks it many times, Jamie seems to simply repeat a single question: What kind of man is Gilgamesh? (What kind of man is Gilgamesh based on that? What does it say about Gilgamesh?). In the discussion he ranked fourth, Jamie also asks most of the questions, and in this case, their
inauthenticity, I think, is directly related to the preparation students did for this
discussion. The questions that Jamie asks are indeed taken directly from the worksheet
students are asked to use to prepare for the discussion: What new ideas about
relationships were brought up through our readings? Which pieces of writing supported
ideas you already had about relationships? What piece of writing challenged your way of
thinking? One is left to wonder how this discussion might have unfolded differently if, as
in the “What is a hero?” discussions, things had been more or less the same, but students
decided which questions to pursue in the large-group discussion.

It is not only who asks the question that determines its authenticity, of course (I’d
hardly want to argue that teachers no longer ask any questions in their classroom).
Another way to look at the authenticity of a question might be to look at the knowledge
source for questions and the kind of reasoning required to answer questions. Questions
of summary and interpretation, for example, require students to bring to bear only their
knowledge of the text they have read, a knowledge that they know to be less than the
more-experienced-other teacher in the room. Any question of summary or interpretation
posed by a teacher is being asked by someone who is bound to have a better answer than
a student might be likely to come up with. However, questions that ask you to evaluate a
collector or text, draw a generalization about life based in a reading of a particular text,
or explain your own procedure for making meaning require you to bring other knowledge
sources to the text: your own experiences, your knowledge of other texts (canonical and
popular), your own work or experience as a reader. Such questions then gain authenticity
in part, because they allow students to bring their knowledge and expertise to bear in the
classrooms. Jamie’s two favorite discussions are those with the greatest range of knowledge sources and kinds of reasoning across the questions.

Jamie actively encouraged reasoning and support about generalizations throughout these discussions. This move promotes student insight and is obviously encouraged by the inquiry frame. It also encourages students to use and make a variety of connections, to which we now turn our attention.

**Connections**

Jamie makes or endorses students to make several kinds of moves that result in connection-making. Inquiry obviously promotes connection-making because inquiry is the intersection of one’s personal experience with the study of the material, and from the material to the real world and possible applications (Wilhelm, 2007). Inquiry also promotes connections because in inquiry students read several related texts around a specific issue that encourages self-to-text, text-to-text and text-to-world connections.

This kind of connection-making is also explicitly encouraged, as when Jamie asks kids for comparisons (which require connections) and when prediscussion techniques ask for personal or popular culture connections to the reading. For example, in the “What makes a good relationship” unit, students were asked to bring a popular song to class that promotes an idea of what makes a good relationship, to summarize the song’s theme, and to say whether they agreed or disagreed with the idea of relationships that was promoted by the song.

There are also some larger issues of classroom culture and teacher-student relationships at play here. Jamie is the kind of teacher who shows great interest in his students and their lives, and who is immersed in and values popular culture. He often
makes use of popular culture in his teaching and conversations with students. This may well have the effect of opening conversational spaces where students are encouraged to do the same things.

In the transcripts themselves we see how he not only allows for, but encourages, celebrates and even inserts popular culture connections, e.g., his enthusiasm over the Star Wars references.

Students repeatedly take up this invitation by making discussion topics personal to themselves and to others, e.g.: What if it was your friend? Are you saying that you would rather die than live without a loved one?

This promotion of student lives as a resource for the classroom project is very important, and is implicated in all the other aspects of discussion he values, and Jamie encourages students to use their lives in the classroom in various ways.

**Make the Students' Lives an Important Source of Knowledge.** Langer (2002) tells us that successful teachers use student language and experiences beyond the classroom to help students learn, and Christoph and Nystrand (2001) explain that this is important because these moments in which students bring their out-of-school knowledge to play in learning in school “bridge the lives of students to the coursework in ways that are meaningful.”

**The Teacher Says.** Jamie comes closest to this sentiment when he expresses that teachers should make sure that they give students “more to talk about,” speaking particularly about the discussions that incorporated the literature at hand also how they read that literature using various critical theories as “lenses” on the material. However, in his descriptions of the best discussions, he also seems to instinctively come close to
discussion the value of students’ experiences in the discussions when he describes
“insight” as involving the students making connections – among texts, between the text
and their own lives, between the texts and those they are familiar with in popular culture.

*The Transcripts Say.* We will remember that Jamie’s favorite transcripts did,
indeed, include many more than average remarks that drew on their personal or general
knowledge. What might Jamie have done to make room for these kind of remarks?
Johanassen and Kahn (2005) suggest that a teacher makes room for students’ lives as
important sources of knowledge when they ask bigger, more open-ended questions.
Indeed we can see a relationship between the kinds of reasoning required by questions
and the number of kinds of knowledge students draw on to answer those questions. In
Jamie’s favorite discussion, students ask questions across all four categories: summary,
interpretation, evaluation and generalization. In order to answer these questions, students
draw almost equally on personal, textual and general knowledge. In the “What kind of
man is Gilgamesh?” the questions are split between summary and interpretation, and the
students’ statements all draw exclusively on the text as a source of knowledge.

*Minimizing “Teacher as Expert.”* Newkirk (1984)argues that teachers can
minimize what he calls the “myth of inspired reading” by infusing the classroom with
texts the teacher has not read. Christoph and Nystrand (2001) say that this “teacher as
expert effect” can be minimized when teachers ask questions to which they don’t know
the answer.

*The Teacher Says.* Jamie comes closest to recognizing the effect of his expertise
on the discussion when he talks about not wanting his responses to bring the discussion to
a halt. He says, for instance, “that’s the other thing, I don’t want it to be, ‘good, I got the
answer that the teacher wanted’ I don’t want it to be that, that scenario.” Here he recognizes that his own role as the teacher lends a kind of weight to his contributions that might hold students back.

The Transcripts Say. While Jamie sticks, for the most part, with canonical texts (his students read *Gilgamesh, Odysseus, and Romeo and Juliet*) he has chosen to organize his curriculum around inquiry themes. This allows him to pair these texts with a wide range of other, more accessible texts (during the course of these two units students also read short stories and poetry, shared popular music, and watched movies). Furthermore, the organization around themes requires that he keep bringing instruction from summarizing and interpreting any one text to using those texts to make generalizations. As has been argued earlier, when students were asked to evaluate or generalize, they used a range of knowledge sources to do so, which increased their sense of expertise within the discussions, and sometimes made them the experts in the room. For instance, in this exchange about heroes, the teacher requires an explanation about an unfamiliar text.

M: I agree. Because isn’t a hero supposed to be like all good-hearted and not like sadistic and evil and stuff:

J: What about *The Punisher*?

B: ahhhh, haha, *The Punisher*!

G: *The Punisher*?

B: That’s a good one

Teacher: Can you explain that to me, Joe, because I don’t know what that is?

J: He is like a vigilante kind of hero-like person, because he is, like, the man. He choked people, but he did it for a good cause.
In this case, the student is the more knowledgeable other, and the teacher is required to request elaboration about a text with which she is unfamiliar, in order to understand how it fits as an example into the larger discussion of the unit's organizing question. One of the things Jamie does, then, to minimize the effect of his expertise on the discussion is to make room for his students' personal and general knowledge, both by organizing his units thematically, and, at his best, organizing classroom discussions around broad questions. He also makes the local level move of professing his own ignorance of a topic (The Punisher) and asking the student to explain, demonstrating interest in the contribution and how it connects to the larger discussion and inquiry.

*Topical: On Point Discussion*

The problem of topicality is one problem that does not raise its head when teachers organize their classrooms monologically, or engage the typical IRE pattern of discussion. In these cases, all sanctioned remarks remain on topic, as the teacher controls the floor and the acceptable range of responses. However, once teachers move to a thematically organized classroom, ask, or allow room for, more open-ended discussions, and arrange for dialogic discussion, the question of keeping things "on topic" becomes more complicated. Where is the line between bringing your home knowledge to bear on the subject, and railroading the discussion? How far do you follow a student away from the center of the work you have laid out? When do you decide the tangent really is not going to bring you back to an enticing or interesting point?

The topics explored by Jamie's students in the context of his classroom are all framed by the larger inquiry and essential question. As argued throughout, inquiry seems implicated in promoting all of the features of discussion that Jamie valued. The inquiry
frame seems to lend a “curricular coherence” and focus to discussions that keep them on point and on topic.

Also helpful for this were the pre-discussion techniques explored in the engagement section. Such activities not only direct student attention on the topic, but also set the students up for success – the pre-discussion activities help them to say things that are on point. Jamie has, in effect, scaffolded the work for them by giving them, for example, a salient quote or passage for response that is connected to the debate and inquiry at hand, or a set of questions from which they might draw as starting points. This work also points them in the right direction for other contributions they might make.

**General Discussion**

The analyses reported in this chapter have examined the qualities of successful classroom discussions of literature, both from the teacher’s perspective and through data revealed in the transcripts of the discussions themselves. Further, these analyses have examined the teacher’s contributions to the success of these discussions. Several general patterns emerge from this study.

1. The teacher’s descriptions of success were generally supported through analyses of the transcripts themselves. In general, if he reported a success, the transcript revealed evidence of that success as well.

2. Use of Marshall’s coding scheme actually elicited evidence of success either hinted at by the teacher, or related to other qualities discussed by the teacher.

3. The teacher used more language to describe the patterns of discourse in the discussion than to describe the kinds of knowledge used and produced in the course of the discussions.
4. While the teacher named several contributions that he did or could make to successfully altering the patterns of discourse in the discussion, he fails to name his real or possible contributions to the kinds of knowledge used or produced in the discussions.

5. There are other teaching techniques in this teacher’s repertoire and in the larger educational repertoire which could help him to meet his articulated goals.

Summary

While none of Jamie’s characteristics of good classroom discussion necessarily add anything surprising to the literature around what makes a good discussion, I would argue there are important lessons in this teacher’s interview about classroom discussions. The first is that while he has a lot of language and rich descriptions for discussing and describing the patterns of discourse in the discussion (participating, debating, fluent), he struggles more to put into words what Marshall, Smagorinsky, and Smith (1995) lead us to pay attention to, which is evidence of the way students think in conversations, and how that thinking is made visible in their language. This seems in keeping with a review of the literature, in which language around the thinking and learning in classroom discussions is much less visible in popular teacher texts than is the language around participation and behaviors in classroom discussion.

Furthermore, a successful classroom discussion requires a delicate balance of a number of factors. Teachers who only see one factor, may fail to organize instruction for success in other areas. As teachers strive toward increasing success in a discussion around a single factor (increasing student’s inclusion of textual references, for example), they may see a setback in other characteristics of the discussion (students’ responses to
one another, for example). Therefore, organizing for dialogic exchange in a literature
discussion probably requires both large-scale or thematic and small-scale or localized (in
the discussion itself) organization and thinking.

In terms of large-scale, thematic organization, inquiry as a framework for
organizing instruction seemed to increase the ability of the teacher to develop dialogic
discourse in the discussion of literature. This framework seems implicated in the success
of the discussion across the range of characteristics that Jamie named as important to
successful classroom discussion.

On the level of teacher professional development or education, Jamie’s realization
that reading the transcripts gave him a new insight into the discussions is important. He
expresses surprise at some of them noting, for example, “I like this one . . . there are
moments when they show understanding, but, um, my impression as that it hadn’t gone
well, but when I look at it and I see what different kids said, I see they had insight.” This,
I think, contains important implications for the way we think about teacher education,
professional development in schools and other supports from professional growth for
teachers.
CHAPTER 5
IMPLICATIONS

Earlier studies of classroom discussions of literature should be convincing of the power of this pedagogy to increase student engagement and learning. One wonders, then, why it is not used more regularly by high school English teachers. This study has helped reveal how and why inconsistencies develop between teachers’ beliefs and practices by examining the practice of a teacher who believes that classroom discussions are important, but difficult. Here we see the importance of a match between intended outcomes and the practice of discussion. We also see how many factors teachers must pay attention to and organize for, and the way that changing one thing can have a ripple effect on other aspects of the discussion.

The implications of the research in Jamie’s classroom can be organized, for me, into three categories: What does this mean to me as a teacher? What does it mean to me as a teacher of other teachers? What does it mean to me as a researcher? While the categories bleed into one another, thinking through the results in this way helps me to chart a course of action in each of these areas.

As a Teacher

While I differed from Jamie in the use of classroom discussions, which is to say that I both believed in them as an important pedagogical tool, and used them frequently in my classroom (Jamie believed they were important but couldn’t figure out how to make them work), this research has shown me two things about my use of classroom discussions: that I had narrowly defined what success might look like, and that I had taught in such a way that I only saw, and taught for, aspects of that success. Because I
defined success as teaching my students to follow a thread of conversation to its logical conclusion before they abandoned the topic to move to another one, I taught them moves and strategies to make this visible in my classroom: students learned two different ways to signal their entry into the discussion, one that signaled that they wanted to talk about the topic on the floor, and a different one to signal that they wanted to introduce a new topic. But as a brand new teacher pointed out when she came to observe my students at work, perhaps only half of the students participated in these conversations.

And yet, while I was interested and focused on the content of the discussion, I had also failed to develop a clear set of terms for talking about the content of the discussions. I knew if students interrupted each other in mid-stream, and I would always remember and cull interesting moments in the conversation, but beyond that, I had no language for talking about what students talked about in the discussion. Jim Marshall’s work, perhaps more than anything in the literature around discussions, interested me in the way that it operationalized both the “stuff” or content of the discussion and the “ways of knowing” about that “stuff.” This schema for thinking about discussions helps me as a teacher in a number of ways as I prepare for and teach my students about discussions. First of all, as Jamie so aptly pointed out in his discussion of the transcript in which students talked about their use of critical theories as “lenses” on their readings, “I thought that the having more to talk about, like you have lenses, or you have more than one way of looking at something . . . open[s] rich conversation, having your question as well as having lenses, like having more than one way to look at something, or more than one way to approach conflict . . . it’s a much richer conversation.” Using Marshall’s schema to ask myself is there room in the conversation I am imagining and preparing for students to speak about
the text, about other texts we have encountered, and their own personal experiences will help me to think about how I encourage or discourage students to/from bringing their knowledge and experience to the table. Also thinking about the kinds of questions that are asked (by me and by students of each other) will help me to tease out the kinds of thinking students are and could be doing in the classroom discussion. I believe having language to name these ways of thinking about student thinking made visible in the classroom discussion will help me to both broaden and deepen the kind of talk around literature in my classroom.

Perhaps the most important thing I have begun to consider since this work is the relationship between the goals and practices of classroom discussion. I've heard the expression, "If the only tool you have is a hammer, you will probably see every problem as a nail." This research has made me wonder if, perhaps, the converse is also true. If you see every problem as a nail, do you wield every tool you have as though it were a hammer? Jamie's third-ranked discussion, the discussion based around the question "What kind of man is Gilgamesh?" particularly makes me wonder about this. While Jamie's other top-ranked discussions were really questions that asked students to make evaluations and generalizations, and clearly asked for their original thinking about a question on the floor, this discussion posed an interpretive question — it asked students to decide what interpretation the evidence of the text supported, but it allowed them little chance to bring to the problem anything that they knew outside of the text. And, since clearly the teacher in the room is the expert in reading a canonical text, I would argue that even a very interesting interpretive problem may leave students feeling like they are performing for the teacher, trying to find the best answer for him, rather than engaging in
a real question of interest or importance to them. I think this point helps me to see the classroom discussion as a tool that should be used in certain classroom situations that truly allow students to bring a breadth of knowledge to a question and allows spaces for them to disagree with the teacher and each other. Other pedagogical choices should be made when this isn’t possible in order not to confuse students as to the real purposes when they are arranged for a discussion.

Indeed, as a classroom teacher, I rarely worked with students to understand why we were having classroom conversations, or about how this was different from other activities we did as a class. When I look at the differences between discussion number one and discussion number four, I believe that an important difference is in the way that students understand the purpose of the discussion. In discussion number one students are told that they should bring to the group “a problem or a question on which they would like to hear more opinions. In discussion four, in which they had had similar preparation, students simply were asked to answer the same questions aloud for the whole group. Again, the first discussion prompts students to pose an interpretive or evaluative question whereas the second poses the questions for them, placing them in the roll of repeating what they have learned, but not of generating new knowledge by asking questions that neither they, nor perhaps anyone else, already knows the answer to.

As a teacher, I also rarely asked students to reflect on or demonstrate the learning that had come from these conversations. There is no standing record of the work I did in my high school English classroom from that last year in which I worked with senior AP students to listen more to one another, but I do wonder what they learned, or even what they thought they were supposed to learn from those classroom discussions.
In the close of his interview in which we looked at the transcripts of his discussions, Jamie notes many more facets of success in classroom discussions than he had originally, as well as the moves he believes a teacher can make to facilitate such success. He mentions things that are common in the literature around classroom discussions such as having reasonable expectations, being comfortable with wait time, controlling turns (if necessary, depending on the class), and holding participants accountable through self-assessment. But here, he also just begins to examine some of the content of the discussions and unpack the way in which different ways of approaching the discussion gives students a different way of being in the discussion. His example came from some work he was experimenting with in using critical theory in the classroom, and inviting students to use “critical lenses.” He says,

Having more to talk about, like you have lenses, or you have more than one way of looking at something. Like is someone a hero, just one question and you explore that to the end, that doesn’t open as rich a conversation as having, uh, having your question as well as having lenses, like having more than one way to look at something, or more than one way to approach conflict, you know like I saw it differently, and they have a way to say it “as a feminist, I saw it this way,” and “as a whatever” you know they have more to say than, well, that’s not the way I saw it, it’s a much richer conversation.

While I find the possibilities of using critical theory with high school readers exciting, this comment of Jamie’s reaches out more generally to a teacher’s responsibility to imagine the purpose of the classroom discussion and the ways in which the content does, or does not, match the pedagogy. For a classroom discussion to be a rich exchange of
ideas that might actually change a participant's way of thinking, the material itself has to engage participants' imaginations, they have to be able to believe that there is something here worth thinking about and that there might, actually, be more than one way legitimate way to think about it. Jamie believes that the use of critical theories empowered students to position themselves in a range of ways in relationship to the particular material they were discussing, and I agree with him; however, I believe that a more general principle underlies this instance, and that there may be other ways to help students assume multiple roles in relationship to a topic. For instance, I believe that situated role play (Wilhelm J. D., 2004) also allows students to take a position other than their own, or augmenting their own, classroom identities and stake stronger claims for their own knowledge than they might be able to speak from their current classroom identity (Gee).

In this interview, Jamie also said, "If teachers taped their classes and listened to them, and said, this is the start of the year, here's the middle of the year, here's the end of the year, or even just in one unit, to see if they've become more fluent and able to debate in a more constructive way, or discuss in a more constructive way..." In the last three years, besides working on this project, I have worked for the National Writing Project as a thinking partner to the teacher inquiry communities network. Both pieces of work have pointed me to the importance of teachers taking an inquiring stance toward their work. Were I to return to a high school or undergraduate classroom, I would want to work myself and in conjunction with other teachers interested in understanding our classrooms in a deeper and richer way to pose problems, suggest solutions, and look at outcomes of classroom practices.
As a Teacher of Teachers

I have spent much of the last decade not only as a teacher but as a teacher of teachers, either in university classrooms, in professional development situations, and through my work at the writing project. For many of those years, and based on my own experiences as a teacher-learner, I believed in describing and modeling pieces of my own practice that I considered successful, so that my colleagues could “take” whatever it was that I was giving them directly back to their classroom. In part, I believed this was important because it seemed, in my experience, teachers were desperate for “something, anything” that they could use right now, or tomorrow to deal with the one or many students in their classrooms by whom they felt frustrated. In my experience, beginning with an experience, practice with students, followed by reflection on the experience, seemed an appropriate model.

My belief in the model that I’ve practiced has occasionally been shaken by what I would call “incomplete transmogrification” of my work to other teachers’ classrooms. There was a time when I blamed this, generally, on the practicing teachers’ failure to theorize the practice. The most important implication for me of this research is the change it has wrought on my understanding of teaching teachers. In “Silences in Our Teaching” Newkirk suggests that all of our success stories in sharing practice have the effect of silencing those of us who struggle in our classrooms. This research was born out of the troubling statistic that while 95% of High school English teachers believe that classroom discussions of literature are important, 25% regularly use this practice. I understand, having watched and listened closely, that like most moves a teacher could
make in his practice, using classroom discussions is a highly complicated endeavor, often involving more than 20 people and all of their worries, hopes, beliefs and agendas.

This deeper understanding of the complexities of teaching will forever change my attitude and practices in the teaching of teachers. I believe that rather than sharing a particular example of my practice with teachers and asking them to “have a go” I will ask teachers to look at examples of teachers at work. Luckily, both Carnegie and the Annenberg foundation have been working to put together video documentary files that contain “real teachers working with real students” that teacher-learners can view together and unpack. These websites, along with videos of my own teaching and the teaching of my colleagues will serve as the more complex and complicated texts for my future interactions with teacher-learners.

Furthermore, I have become convinced that only lived experience and deep reflection upon and theorizing of that lived experience can support teachers’ growth. I am very excited by the possibilities of teacher research, especially that teacher research supported by inquiry communities in which teachers learn processes and protocols for looking at their own teaching work and the work of caring and committed colleagues. The truth of the matter is that while it was often difficult and painful to look and relook at Jamie’s teaching through the process of this research project, it was also, for both of us, a great deal of fun. We shared a growing love of the students in this classroom, a growing desire to understand what made a moment in the day sparkle, and a growing understanding of how to build Jamie’s (and my) capacity to capitalize on and create more such moments. Teaching can be a very lonely profession. Teacher research communities
not only increase capacity of teachers to improve practice, they also help teachers to become curious, thoughtful, playful and to feel efficacious.

As a Researcher

Working with my husband as a research informant has had much the same effect on my research agenda that having a child had on my teaching agenda. That is to say, that it did not so much change as it did deepen my resolve to “do no harm.” As a classroom teacher I believed in the idea of “doing no harm” in probably a rather limited way – by which I mean, I guess, that I believed I should work hard not to directly harm any child. After my daughter was born and as she came into more social situations, I came to see that directive “do no harm” as requiring more action, perhaps “make sure no harm is done by you, your practice, or others within your community.” As a member of the National Writing Project’s “teachers teaching teachers” community I have always believed in both research and professional development that did no harm to teachers; but now having spent a year in another teacher’s classroom, and having worked to understand his beliefs and practices, to learn alongside him, and to fairly represent his work to a larger audience – all the while trying to stayed married to him – I also see my research agenda’s ideal of “do no harm” deepened to “do good, get in there, roll up your sleeves and help.”

The more I worked with the interview and classroom discussion transcripts in this study, the more deeply I came to see what was working in Jamie’s classroom, and the more I also came to see the ways in which he was blinded to some of his own successes. It was exciting to code the transcripts, and see patterns emerge that showed me new ways of naming both what students were accomplishing in his classroom, and what he had done, whether based on explicit knowledge or gut instinct, to help them.
I would much enjoy continuing in this line of research with classroom teachers interested in developing their uses of talk, particularly whole class discussions, as a tool for learning in their classrooms. I imagine a next study involving a group of teacher researchers in looking at the kinds of knowledge and kinds of reasoning required by the questions they and their students use in whole class discussions of literature.

I would also love to gather a group of teacher-researchers willing to video tape their class discussions of literature, and then work with me to use Marshall’s coding scheme to name the kinds of knowledge and reasoning students are doing in their classrooms. I think this kind of “looking, and looking again” at their work helps teachers to see and honor success, their own and their students, while at the same time seeing new ways to be even more successful. Such a way of looking at their classrooms allows teachers to change their practices in an effective way, but from a plateau of their current success, rather than from a feeling of abject failure.

Ultimately, this is the goal of my future research agenda – do no harm, and while you’re at it, see if you can do some good.
REFERENCES


Connolly, B., & Smith, M. (2002). Teachers and students talk about talk: Class discussions and the way it should be. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 46*(1), 16-27.


Rex, L., & McEachen, D. (1999). If anything is odd, inappropriate, confusing or boring, it's probably important: The emergence of inclusive academic literacy


APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Tanya Baker, a doctoral candidate in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Maine. The purpose of the research is to examine classroom discussions of literature.

What will you be asked to do?
If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in two one-on-one interviews. It may take approximately two periods (90 minutes) to participate. These interviews will be conducted as your school outside of class time (before or after school, during a study hall or lunch period). In general the interview questions will be related to reading and English class. Additionally, if you choose to participate, you may be invited to provide copies of some of your work from English class. These might include assignments that you have handed in or worked on in English class.

Except for your time and inconvenience, there are few foreseeable risks to your participating in this study. It is possible that you might become uncomfortable responding to questions about the way that you read or how you identify yourself as a reader. However, your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions or activities in which you do not want to participate. Although personal benefits are limited, you may learn something about the way that you approach the task of reading.

Confidentiality
I will make an audiotape of our interviews and transcribe the tape. The written transcript will be used for analysis. I am the only person who will hear the tapes. The audiotapes and the typed transcripts will be stored in a locked file cabinet in my home office. Your name will not appear on any documents. A code name will be used to protect your identity. The key linking your name to the data will be destroyed after the data analysis is complete.

Voluntary
Participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time during the study. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

Contact Information
If you have any questions about this study, please contact me by phone at 581-2711 or by email at tanya.baker@umit.maine.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Gayle Anderson, Assistant to the University of Maine’s Protection of Human Subjects Review Board at 581-1498 (or email gayle.anderson@umit.maine.edu).

Your signature below indicated that you have read and understand the above information. You will receive a copy of this form.
### APPENDIX B

Sample Coded Transcript

#### Table B.1 Excerpt of Coded Transcript from November 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Communication unit</th>
<th>Direct</th>
<th>Nature of remark</th>
<th>Reasoning</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Reasoning</th>
<th>Respond</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>so with all those directions would someone like to start?</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cool.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ty</td>
<td>That’s it?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>I don’t know what to say</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ty</td>
<td>Oh, come on</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>Andy, Andy. Help me out.</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>How is the Odyssey a good book?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>It was a good example of a heroes quest.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>okay, I’m going to turn Andy’s statement into a question. do you agree or disagree that the Odyssey is a good example of a heroes quest?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>and actually Andy is going to follow up and call on people since he brought up the topic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>Quickly, Andy, everyone needs to have enough time</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>I did NOT think it was a good example because he didn’t actually do anything except try to get home</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>I agree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Oh, I’m still supposed to pick people?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>Until they aren’t talkin’ about your topic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BR</td>
<td>I think it was a good topic because there was a lot of hero... ism, hero, umm, well, there were a lot of good hero characters and they had good qualifications for the job and they did a good job, like, umm, like</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>IF 2/4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

134
Table B.1 Excerpt of Coded Transcript from November 4 continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Odysseus was a good hero so it definitely is a good example of a heroes quest.</th>
<th>IF</th>
<th>2/4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Eric?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>well, I think the Odyssey is a good example of a heroes quest, because it has like all the stuff of a heroes quest (bell rings) and all that</td>
<td>IF</td>
<td>2/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Billy</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BI</td>
<td>, I thought Odysseus, was (lost) like when he wouldn't help his crew? (lost)</td>
<td>IF</td>
<td>2/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Wilson?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>well, I didn't think it was good because he killed a lot more people than he saved and it was his fault when he killed, I mean like when his crew got killed</td>
<td>IF</td>
<td>2/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GR</td>
<td>I agree</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>the time that they lost everything because, well, like everything was gone because he was like yelling at the Cyclops that was the Odyssey wasn't it?</td>
<td>IF</td>
<td>2/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>and uhh, all the suitors he killed.</td>
<td>IF</td>
<td>2/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>And like a lot of other bad stuff happened that was like his fault,</td>
<td>IF</td>
<td>2/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and all he did was try to get home like she said</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I mean, he didn't have too many heroic deeds in there.</td>
<td>IF</td>
<td>2/1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C

Transcript of Jamie’s Interview

T: Why don’t we begin with you just telling me how you chose the top four transcripts and how you ranked them.

J: I ranked them by fluency, and what I mean by that is as a teacher how much did the kids actually um discuss on their own without my having to prod, and um you know, pull out, pull out answers from them and um there’s some

And the sessions that were best for me were the ones that had some insightful answers, you know, dense, and um you know, that’s how I ranked them basically.

A session about Odysseus as a hero… you know, was he a hero wasn’t he a hero

Once it gets going there’s a lot of debate about the qualities of a hero, and the teacher, doesn’t have to do much, there’s talk about vigilantes, can a hero be a vigilante the qualities of Odysseus, but the exchanges in this one were fairly quick, but they were on topic and I liked that, even them asking each other some questions, and some debate, it sounded like they were into it, ummm the other thing I liked was ummm they started talking about Oprah, Dr. Phil, some kind of current things. . .

And they started talking about females, you know, heroines, and how that worked. They brought in star wars. So, I just thought it was a lively exchange and there were, it wasn’t the same kids dominating, either that was the other thing about it, but uh, this is where they had the notecards and they were throwing them in. I thought that worked well.

The next one. . . starts with a long explanation about what the purpose is

This one gets off a little hard, and then there are a couple of kids who do disrupt a little bit but they also have insightful things to say. Again, O. comes up was he a hero was he not a hero. Something stuck out, oh, did he go too far. . . again, lively debates that got at the essence of does it matter, what is a warrior and . . . umm… just a second here. They talked about Enkidu and Gilgamesh without prodding, so they were switching between texts without the teacher having to say, “Well, what about Enkidu, what about Gilgamesh.

And one thing I liked about this was how the teacher, when there is one kid always talking, always talking and the teacher comes in and says, very frankly, that um, I am interested in what you have to say, but you are talking over other people, people that have quieter voices than you, so its important…so it wasn’t, it was very patient and it got things back on track, and then, as a result of that, there were some good questions about fake heroes and real life heroes which I thought brought it back again, like in the other one, brought it back to what THEY know, like modern-day heroes, they don’t have super powers, but they have sort of, they’ve done, they’ve. . .
I prod too much in this, is why it gets rated low. And the thing that put it low is that I’m in there almost as much as the kids are, and I think that’s kind of excessive. I’m not waiting for things to unfold, I’m kind of prodding them. But there are some insightful moments, when they talk about heroes trying to prove themselves, which is something that we never really talked about, it just sort of came out in the discussion... heroes are people trying to prove themselves. And, um, there’s a short episode where there is really not much prodding, and they get into the flow of it on their own which I like, and they start wrestling with real questions, like trying to find an accurate description of what a hero really is and, you know, that was interesting. They were wrestling with that, they were debating a little bit. I question why I am jumping in at certain points when I could have probably just sat still and let things happen.

The other reason, rather than waiting for kids to explain, I offer explanations, you know, the strength of the other discussions is that the explanation came from the students, the weakness of this is that I provide the explanation, and I’m sure if I’d waited someone else could have come up with it. Rather than a discussion, they are sharing different passages in this one, and then they are giving their insight, so it’s more of a shared analysis, but not much debate later on in it. They are trying to do their part, and you know, they talk about selfishness, they get into talking about selfishness (a concept) . . . .

There were some insightful moments but it didn’t have the fluency.

I like this one. . . there are moments where they show little tidbits of understanding but um, like my impression was that it hadn’t gone well, but then when I look at it and I see what different kids said, and I see that they had insight, about the duo as more powerful, and we had talked about the duo . . . the weakness is . . . it doesn’t seem to start, it starts reluctantly, a little bit, you know, like “Okay, I’ll start if someone has to start” a little bit, you know. The weakness, too, is that I say that I am not going to force this, it is just going to unfold, but then I end up forcing it, ha, I say that I am not going to force it, but at the same time, in the process, I end up forcing it. Ummm... balancing that off, though are some insightful moments about enkidu changing, and that was tied in with the assessment I was going to be doing, too, does he change, does he not change. But what’s lacking is praise, and I guess as I read it I’m wondering what is my role as the mediator, how do I facilitate this?

There’s a lot of prodding, like on the fourth page, I’m in here one, two, three, four times, prodding. And I keep repeating the question, What kind of man is Gilgamesh, but clearly I’m not getting, maybe I needed to restate the question, be more specific or something. . . and under the criteria of how fluent are they, this is weaker because there is more of me in there then there should be.

There was one that talked about lenses, I don’t know which one, where they started talking metacognitively about lenses. . . I like the fact that even if they weren’t happy, even if they thought it was slowing them down, what’s the role of these lenses in the work they do and the way they read, that one impressed me, you know, I thought, “That’s cool, that’s smart.”
Seamless transitions. ... they move back and forth naturally, they do it naturally, though, without me saying, Well, how does that compare to...?" they just did it.

T: Insightful moments? What constitutes an insightful moment?

J: It might just be a moment where a kid stepped up without me prodding, and he maybe compared . . . without, without something before that required them to answer in that way, and maybe it didn’t even get followed up on, but my feeling is that, that, hopefully I recognized it, gave them a thumbs up, or maybe someone recognized them, noted that that was clever, you know, that was definitely worth saying and it might not show up for a few minutes, until later in the conversation somebody might come back to it, hook up to it, use that as a springboard for something else.

T: You talked about participation. Is that a requirement of a good conversation?

J: Participation.. . right, that everyone is required to do, to add something, there are always going to be some that do more than others, but that nobody is left sitting quiet, nobody is idle through the whole thing

T: Did learning occur because of or through these conversations or are they more moments to display learning?

J: I didn’t measure learning, do a pre and post test of what they know. I think the nature of the way it is delivered it ends up being a display. . . and I couldn’t say . . .
Do you mean do I think the kids walked away with a little more of an understanding? Some of the ideas. . .
Yeah, do kids see things in a new way? Deepen their learning? Learn from each other?
I think they do, but I don’t have any proof, but my feeling is they might grab onto something, you know, you’re right, so and so was selfish, but he had to be. ..
I think it depends on how engaged they are, I think there are things that happen too, off task, where kids are formulating ideas that might change what they thought. . . like they might think, here’s my shot, here’s what I think, but I’m going to wait and hear what they have to say and that might color what they say, so yeah, I think they are learning, but it isn’t something that I measured.

T: Do you think it is important, taking this half hour, is it important that they learn from one another, or is it enough that kids see this as an assessment, and they display their knowledge to one another and they don’t learn from the exchange?

J: I think it is really important because it models sharing ideas in a safe environment instead of you know if you have a half-decent teacher, it is a safe place to learn how to discuss rather than talk radio, where the loudest person wins, you have to back up what you say, you might be challenged on what you say, but its safe and I think it is a step, a step to being a good citizen, being able to hear each other, being held accountable, to sit and listen, um wait your turn, disagree with someone in an appropriate way, you know,
that’s very valuable you know, I think, there’s a lot of media out there that doesn’t model that, so it needs a balance. I like doing it, but it’s painful to me.

T: Why?

J: Well, it’s painful to review the transcripts and see how much I did without, like sometimes I didn’t really let them, let it go, time I guess you’d call it. A couple of times I was sarcastic.

T: I don’t think you were sarcastic, you might read them like that, but if you listened to them you wouldn’t hear that

J: So, you know, to hear word for word what I said, you know, I’m not always happy but

T: What can a teacher do to have successful classroom conversations?

J: You would have some reasonable expec.... Like you’d have wait time, where a silence might be just, it will come, they will say something if you wait, instead of just thinking well, it’s been quiet 10 seconds, or 5 seconds, without, you know, having to redirect. So being comfortable with that is important, I think

I thought that the having more to talk about, like you have lenses, or you have more than one way of looking at something. Like is someone a hero, just one question and you explore that to the end, that doesn’t open as rich a conversation as having, uh, having your question as well as having lenses, like having more than one way to look at something, or more than one way to approach conflict, you know like I saw it differently, and they have a way to say it “as a feminist, I saw it this way,” and “as a whatever” you know they have more to say than, well, that’s not the way I saw it, it’s a much richer conversation

And depending on the class, the idea of like controlling turns, like the . . . could be really helpful, hold them accountable

The self-assessment thing I like, give yourself a score at the end based on what you did, sort of holding yourself accountable, I like that, so I think those are things that good facilitators do,

Praise, giving sincere praise and recognizing that might not even be picked up in the audio, but it might just be the way you respond the way you look [at a student], just your general conduct as a facilitator, that’s the other thing, I don’t want it to be, “good, I got the answer that the teacher wanted” I don’t want it to be that, that scenario, but I want everyone to be comfortable saying, hey, that was smart, that was insightful, that reminds me of . . .” so, um... I think at the end, too, a good facilitator will summarize, will time it well enough, and this is the shortcoming of a 40 minute period when you really probably have 30 minutes for a discussion is getting 20-22-23 kids to talk and then allowing time for summary, to say, well, here are some of the things that stood out or having them
provide a summary, you know, here’s what came out of it, and sharing that, you know, so that might bring out the what was learned and validate that we are doing this for a real purpose, not just, cause they always had discussions, I’m sure they’ve had many discussions but its teacher dominated,

A good facilitator recognizes, too, that even if it doesn’t go well, there is probably something to be learned from that, too, its like, so, okay, that one didn’t go well, how am I going to, what do they need to make it go well, do they need a different way of um interacting, like with the cards without the cards

Getting back to the praise thing, hopefully you would be able to get the kids to praise each other so that it’s not just the teacher praising

There’s that goofy thing on happy days when someone had a good poem, they’d all snap their fingers, maybe something like that, something that freshmen would latch on to, I don’t mean like that, but something

I guess if you did enough of them, you might gain some fluency. If teachers taped their classes and listened to them, and said, this is the start of the year, here’s the middle of the year, here’s the end of the year, or even just in one unit, to see if they’ve become more fluent and able to debate in a more constructive way, or discuss in a more constructive way...
APPENDIX D

Preparation for “What Makes a Hero” discussion

Write silently for 10 minutes.

1. Think back to the beginning of the quarter. What did you say/think made someone a hero?

2. Think about what you read (Star Wars, The Odyssey, Gilgamesh).
   a. How did these stories reinforce, challenge, or extend your definition of a hero?
   b. How do you feel about these examples of heroes?
   c. Who or what should we have read to think about what makes a hero?

3. What do you think the stages of the heroes quest and archetypes added to your thinking about your reading?

4. (Period 3 only) How do you think critical lenses affected/changed your reading or your thinking about the readings?
APPENDIX E

Preparation for “What Makes a Good Relationship?”

Write responses to the following questions (15 minutes)

During the last quarter we have written, read, and thought about the question “What makes a good relationship?” How have your thoughts on this subject been reinforced or challenged? What new ideas have you heard?

We read short stories (“The Chaser”), poems (“The Choice” “Love is Not All” “In the Metro”), a play (Romeo and Juliet). We listened to songs and to each other. Write about one piece of writing that you heard that supported your ideas about what makes a good relationship.

Write about one piece of writing that challenged your view of relationships.

If you could get one character or author in here and talk to him/her about what makes a good relationship, who would it be and why?

What else should we have read, written, or created that would have helped us to explore this subject?
BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Tanya Baker was born in Bangor, Maine on March 9, 1968. She grew up in and around Brewer, Maine and graduated from Brewer High School in 1986. Tanya attended the University of Maine, and graduated from there in 1990 with a B.A. in psychology. She worked as a teacher and a literacy coordinator for 12 years; most of her teaching career was spent in the Brewer School Department. Tanya earned a Master’s degree in Literacy Education in 1999.

Tanya currently works as the Associate Director of National Programs for the National Writing Project in Berkeley, California. She is a candidate for the Doctor of Education degree in Literacy Education from the University of Maine in August, 2008.